

## **Danger Zone by DistrictThirteenTribute**

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**Summary:** When Hawkins High School's bad girl Elizabeth "El" Hopper fails one test too many, she's told she will not graduate with her class if she keeps it up. How much will her grades, and her life, change when Mike Wheeler, AV club President and King of the Nerds, takes on the challenge of tutoring her? AU. Rated T.

# 1. Chapter 1

Hello! I'm really glad the summary piqued your interest. I've seen lots of nerdy yet assertive Mike and sweet, innocent Eleven stories on here and thought it'd be interesting to change it up a bit. This is completely AU. No Upside Down (at least, not as you know it) and El does not have powers. Despite all that, please keep an open mind. I'm excited for this story and I hope you enjoy!

El's POV

*"Will Elizabeth Hopper please report to the main office? Elizabeth Hopper to the main office please."*

*What now?*

I rolled my eyes at the noise of the school intercom, asking, once again, for my presence in the main office. I could sense some of my classmates' eyes on me, their gazes obvious. Sitting up, I closed the textbook I was barely paying attention to, shoved it into my backpack that had previously been on the floor, and got up without a word. On my way out of the room, I shrugged at Mrs. Philips, my history teacher who was surely as happy about me leaving class early as I was.

Since classes were going on, the hallways were empty. Seeing no need to rush, I walked across the building taking my sweet time, not caring if anyone saw me and questioned why I was out of class.

As if anyone would actually wonder. My name was publicly called down to the office. And with the reputation I have, everyone in this school knows my name.

"You rang?" I spoke to the secretary as soon as she was within earshot.

"Principal Clarke would like to see you." She gestured for me to go on into his office as she held the phone I assumed she was talking to someone on away from her mouth.

"Hmm." I shot her a tight smile as my personal way of a thank you. I walked the few steps to his office and let myself in. I figured since I was called in here, I didn't have to knock.

"Ahh, Ms. Hopper." Mr. Clarke said. "Please take a seat." I took one on the seat closest to where I stood and placed my arms on the armrests and put on my bored demeanor. "So I will just jump right on to it." He picked up a manila folder that lay on his desk. "I have the results of your first calculus test of the year."

My face fell at that.

Just great.

"Oh," was all I could get out.

"Yes, I said something similar." He spoke as he put the folder back down. "Ms. Hopper, I sure you might know, but your grades have slipping for some time." I stayed quiet since I felt too guilty to admit it. "And now it has seriously affected your academic standing."

I've come to see him enough times to understand all his little undertones. He had something else he wanted to say, but he wasn't sure how.

"What is it?" I spoke it in a careless tone even though I was concerned about what he would say.

"At the rate you're going Elizabeth," he started slowly, "I'm afraid you won't be eligible for graduation at the end of the school year."

"Wha- what?!" I sputtered out.

"Ms. Hopper, you -you will not graduate with your classmates in the spring if you don't pick your grades up. I'm sorry."

In a very unlike me manner, I sat there, unable to say anything. I looked down at the rug, unable to look at Mr. Clarke in the face.

I always considered myself an average student. It would still be a miracle if I ever made it onto the Honor Roll. While part of me never really cared about school, graduating was something I wanted to

accomplish, since it was something I never really saw myself doing. And now it seemed I was on my way to doing just the opposite.

"Now," he continued, "since you are overage, the school can be discreet about all this in regard to telling the Chief. Unless of course, you want to tell him yourself."

*Tell Jim I'm on the verge on flunking out of school? No, thanks.*

"But that is entirely up to you. I hope your situation improves, Elizabeth. I'm sure if you apply yourself, you can-."

"Can I go now?" At that, we both grew quiet. "It's just you're going to tell me the same thing you always do. And out of respect for you, I think it's best if we don't waste each other's time. I'll try harder." I sat up in my seat. "I really will. Thank you for the warning." A part of me hoped it didn't come off sounding overly rude because the thing is, Scott Clarke really wasn't a bad guy.

Back in middle school, he was an Earth science teacher for over ten years and one of the most well-liked people by both staff and students. He was promoted to teaching freshman biology in the same year I started high school and now he's in his second year of being principal. It was a quick rise to the top but one that, based on his hard work and likability, was well-deserved. So, in a way, I feel bad that he has to sit there and lecture me on the same topic for the hundredth time.

"Well, before I dismiss you," he started, "please note that I've made arrangements for you to work with the peer tutors from the National Honor Society."

*What?!*

"I- I really don't think-."

"I think we can both agree that this will benefit you Ms. Hopper." He got all formal with me again. "They meet Mondays, Wednesdays, and every other Friday at 3:15 in the school library. The program starts tomorrow. When you arrive, please see Mrs. Chapman at the front desk and she'll let you know who you'll be working with."

I exhaled weakly, unsure of what to say because I knew that Mr. Clarke's words were not just a request. Finally, I spoke.

"Okay. Fine. Thank you." After what felt like forever, I got up from my seat.

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## **Mike's POV**

I popped the last bit of Eggo waffle I brought from home into my mouth as I made my way down the hall to my AP History class. Out of nowhere, a white sneaker covered foot appeared and before I had time to react, I was on the floor. I could hear various people snigger and some give a full out laugh as I faced the person responsible.

Troy Johnson. Of course.

"Watch where you're going, Wheeler!" he gave a smug smile and walked away before I could say anything, not that I would have.

I picked myself up and brushed off my pants, readjusting my glasses as well.

"Hey, you okay? I saw what happened," Lucas, one of my best friends, approached me.

"Yeah," I mumbled. "Troy's just being a moron again."

"Man, forget him. Come on, let's get to class." Lucas turned, his backpack just as large as mine, and I followed him to one of the many classes that we shared. I was glad to see that our other friends, Will and Dustin, were already here as well. Since it was the first time today that we were all seeing each other, we all exchanged waves and hellos.

Similar as we do in all the classes we have together, we sat in a square formation in the first two rows of desks. Me and Will next to each other, and Dustin and Lucas right behind us.

I sort of have a closer bond with Will than with the other guys. His older brother Johnathan is actually going out with my older sister Nancy. They started going out their last two years of high school and

are doing the long-distance thing now that they're in separate colleges. Nancy is at Georgetown while Johnathan is at Indiana U.

Everyone in the class was talking amongst themselves when our teacher came in and quieted everyone down. Within a few minutes, we all had our notebooks open as we followed along to what Mr. Schmidt was saying.

All of a sudden, the noise of the school intercom cackled, signaling that an announcement was about to be made.

***"Will Elizabeth Hopper please report to the main office? Elizabeth Hopper to the main office please."***

I rolled my eyes in response. Elizabeth Hopper practically lives in the main office. It's no use interrupting everyone else's day just to call out the one person who always getting into trouble.

Class seemed to rush by and soon enough, the guys and I were at our adjoining lockers, getting ready for the next class.

"So what do you think she's in for this time?" Dustin, who has the locker to my right, asked the group.

"Who?" spoke Will's small voice.

"Elizabeth!" Dustin spoke as if it couldn't have been anyone else. "This is like the third time in two weeks she's been called down."

"Why do you even care?" Lucas spoke for all of us.

"Well, aren't you the least bit curious?" Dustin defended. "The hottest girl in school was sent to the office again. Do you want to know what she did this time?" We all shrugged and ignored him, something we do more than we probably should with Dustin.

Truthfully, I was a little curious to what was going on with her this time. She really does get trouble too often for it not to be noticeable. She's one of those girls whose reputation precedes her, so you can always assume she's up to no good.

From what I know, although really, it's all just things I've heard

though the school's gossip train, she's usually in for small things such as skipping class or being caught smoking on school property. At the end of the day, she is the Chief of police's daughter so she likely isn't really doing anything illegal.

But Dustin did have another point.

The girl is hot. Like, really hot.

She's slightly taller than average, with messy chocolate brown hair that goes a little past her shoulders. Her dark eyes and pink tint of her lips contrast well with her porcelain skin. Her eyes were smudged with black liner, a color that always matched some part of her outfit.

While the school doesn't really have a strict dress code, there's no denying how different her style is from everyone else's. She wears band tees and ripped jeans. Lots of her clothes hug her body in a different way than most girls. It's something that a lot of people - Dustin obviously included- have noticed. And I guess, admittedly, I have too.

"Hey, are you guys doing the tutoring program for National Honor Society?" Will spoke again, and I was grateful he was changing the subject.

"The one that starts tomorrow?" Lucas answered. "Yeah, Mike and I are." I nodded. "You?"

"I won't be able to. I start working tomorrow." To earn some money for college next fall, Will's mom, Joyce, got him a part-time job at Melvald's General Store. She actually used to work there too but has worked as a receptionist at the hospital for the past couple of years.

"And you'll be in biology club, right?" I turned and asked Dustin.

"Yup," he replied, popping the 'p' sound.

"Guess it's just the two of us then." Lucas nudged me with his elbow.

"Yeah," I answered. "I wonder who will come this year."

Before we could exchange theories on it, the warning bell rang,

leaving us to quickly gather what we needed, shut our lockers, and get to our next class.

I feel like I'll get questions on this so I'll just tell you now that yes, El is adopted. Why she calls him Jim along with more on their history is something you'll have to keep reading to find out...

Please let me know what you think! Feedback means so much to me. I've already started working on chapter two so hopefully there will be some interest for that.... Thank you for reading!



## 2. Chapter 2

Thank you guys so much for love in the first chapter! I'm really glad you are enjoying it. But bear with me. I hate and know slim to none about advance math so whenever they're discussing it, please note it will just be random numbers/letters. Don't come here looking for math help, just letting you know....

Here's chapter 2!

El's POV

"So what did you get called in for this time?" My best friend Max, asked during lunch later that day as she blew out smoke from her cigarette.

We weren't allowed to smoke during school hours or on school grounds but over the years, we, along with the other member of our group, Kali, had mastered at finding all the best secluded spots on campus.

"I failed my calculus test." I said as casually as if I were reciting the date and time while taking a drag of my own.

"Damn, another one?" Kali spoke this time after taking a bite from her sandwich. Although it didn't sound like it, I knew there was a hint of concern in her voice. I nodded in reply. "So what did he say?" I didn't have to tell them that I spoke to Mr. Clarke.

I thought about if I should tell them about me failing out of school. I suppose it was something private but I figured it'd be okay. They're my best friends and I could tell them... almost everything.

"Basically," I started, "that at the rate I'm going, I won't be able to graduate this year."

Max's blue eyes widened and I'm sure she wasn't expecting that.

"Holy shit! She exclaimed. "What are you gonna do?"

With a sigh, I replied. "I guess I'll have to "apply myself"," I put up air

quotes with my free hand. "He umm... he also set me up for tutoring."

Both of them laughed at that.

"With those losers that stay after school every day?" Max grinned widely.

"You must be doing awful if he wants to torture you like that." Kali put in. "Are you actually going to go?"

"He didn't make it sound like a suggestion. He was pretty serious." Both girls looked at me sympathetically. "I'll just go to pass a few tests but I'll do my own stuff too." I shrugged. "I'll actually go to class and pay attention or some shit. It can't be that hard to bring my grades up."

"What do you think your dad is going to say?" Kali brought up.

"I don't plan to tell him and the school won't tell him because I'm overage. As long as I don't really get kicked out, there shouldn't be a problem." They nodded and seemed to agree with me about not telling Jim.

A few minutes later, the bell rang and we scrambled to stomp out our evidence.

After school, the drive home was a quiet one. I didn't even turn the radio on. Even though I had decided not to tell Jim about what Principal Clarke told me about school, it was still all I could think about. I had to get it out of my head though. I wouldn't see him for a few hours, but if I didn't get my mind off it, he's smart enough to figure out that something's up based on the look on my face and then likely interrogate me about it over dinner.

As I walked into the kitchen to heat up an Eggo waffle, my usual after school snack, I noticed the small red light of the answering machine blinking from the living room.

Walking over to it, I pressed the button to play the unheard message.

"Hey kid," the sound of my adopted dad's voice was easily recognizable. "look, I just wanted to give you a heads up that I won't

be home for dinner. There was some fight down at the lake and both guys are in the hospital. I gotta stay here to get some answers out of them.... There's some leftovers in the fridge or you can order somethin' if you want. Whatever you do, just save me some if you do alright? I'll be back later tonight. Love you."

The beep that followed signified that there were no other messages.

With a sigh, I plopped myself down on my couch and reached for the remote, not really feeling hungry anymore.

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It wasn't until the following morning that I realized exactly how embarrassing this whole situation was.

Besides the fact that I was failing out of school, I was now going to try to fix it with mandatory help from the school geeks that wouldn't know a good time if it hit them on their braces. Not only that but, thanks to the program being such a public event, they, along with everyone else that was getting tutored, would know I was there. All I could hope for then, was that no one knew the details of *why* I was there.

I could have bailed on it. And boy, did I want to. Even with girls making plans after school, it gave me reason to miss it. But I knew that it was probably better for everyone involved if I showed up.

Walking in over ten minutes late, I entered through one of the double doors and took a wide look around. I've only ever been in the school library a couple of times in the past four years and never for more than a few minutes. I wasn't even entirely sure how big it was. I quickly found the large circular front desk and made my way towards it.

"Uhh hi." I approached Mrs. Chapman, the teacher that runs the tutoring program and who would be further sentencing me to my punishment. "I'm here for the tutoring." I didn't think it was necessary for me to tell her who sent me. "My name's El -, Elizabeth."

"Ahh yes, Ms. Hopper," she sounded oddly excited to see me. She shuffled a few papers around and soon pulled one up with my name

written in big letters on the top. "You'll be working with Mike Wheeler, one of our brightest," she smiled. "Please give him this paper when you arrive. Table eleven." And that explained the number written besides my name on the paper.

I took it from her and turned, facing the many desks that were scattered around the room in front of the high bookshelves. On each desk, there was a folded piece of paper with a number on it, identifying it to students. Some desks already had two people on them and they were already busy working. I walked along them until I found the one that corresponded to me and my new study buddy. With a sigh, I approached it.

"Hey." I got the attention of a guy with curly black hair whose head was buried in a textbook. "Are you Mike?"

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## **Mike's POV**

I looked up from my physics textbook, fixing my glasses which were sliding down my nose. Unable to believe it, Elizabeth Hopper stood in front of me.

"Uhh, yeah?"

"You sure?" Her lip quirked up.

"Yes," I cleared my throat. "Can I help-?"

"I was told to give you this." She slid a piece of paper towards me as she pulled up a chair and, not so gracefully, sat on it. "Looks like you're my tutor."

"Uhh." I sputtered as I glanced at the evaluation sheet she had given me. Sure enough, our names were on the top, assigning us as partners.

We never know who we're going to get to tutor until the first session. Having access to everyone's records, Mrs. Chapman takes a look at what specific subject or subjects the student needs help with and tries to assign a peer tutor who is strong in that course. Since I was really good at multiple subjects, I could be paired with pretty much anyone

and I always looked forward to seeing who it would be.

There's no way I could have been prepared for who it would be this time around though. No one other than Elizabeth Hopper with all her leather jacket wearing, smoke smelling glory.

Dustin is going to lose it.

"Yeah, looks like it," I finally answered. I couldn't help but notice how flat and seemingly empty her backpack looked.

I glanced over at her, longer than I probably should have.

Having never been, or ever thought I would be, this close to her, her wavy hair looked brighter than how it usually looks from a distance. Her eyes were a rich brown and her red stud piercing on her left nostril glinted in the light. She gave me a look and it was then that I turned away.

"So are we going to start or...?"

"Right, um, okay," I hastily replied. Another quick look back confirmed that she rolled her eyes. Jeez, what was wrong with me? I usually wasn't this awkward while I was tutoring. "So why don't you tell me what you're having trouble with." In previous years, the sheet she handed me would tell me what subject the student was having issues with and maybe what we should focus on. Typically, if it wasn't mentioned, I would have to ask, since it was likely a few.

"Well," she tilted her head to the side, almost like if she was thinking about telling me something. "I'm here because I failed a calculus test."

"Okay," I nodded, a little surprised that she was so open and honest about it. "We can work on that. Did you bring your book?" I asked even though I already knew the answer.

"No...." she trailed off. "I guess I should have, huh?"

"It's okay." But really, how else was she supposed to study? "We can use mine." Lucky for her, AP Calculus and normal calculus classes used the same textbook. I reached for my backpack on the other side of the circular table and moved it closer to me to grab the book.

"Whoa, that's quite a load you got there." I could tell she was saying it in an unimpressed way.

"I just... like to be prepared," I defended, not entirely sure why. I couldn't really make out the expression on her face. "Do -do you know the chapter you guys are on?"

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"So it's fifty-three over....?"

"Seven?" She answered as she released her lip from her teeth.

"Yup. You got it." She smiled to herself, likely feeling proud that she figured it out.

Since it was only the beginning of the school year, Elizabeth's class was still working on the basic parts of calculus, which meant it hopefully wouldn't be too difficult to help her or for her to get the hang of it. It took some time and a few practice problems, but she was doing well. At least now I had more of an idea of where she was struggling so I knew what we should work on next time.

"It- uh- it looks like it's time to go." If looking up at the clock didn't confirm that our hour and a half session was over, seeing the many empty surrounding tables did.

"Oh. Okay." She didn't make too much of a move to pack anything up since all of it, except the pencil she was using, was my stuff anyway.

"Good job today," I spoke the generic, encouraging phrase I was supposed to say to everyone. "I'll see you Friday, Elizabeth."

"El'," she spoke.

"Hmm what?" I turned to face her as I closed my notebook.

"I don't really go by 'Elizabeth'," she explained. "Call me 'El'."

**So these two have met and it seems to be going pretty well... for now. If you are able to, please follow me on Twitter at D13Tribute! I'm always giving updates and some sneak peeks to my stories on there and it's an easy way for us to interact. Also**

**please review if you can! Thanks for reading!**

### 3. Chapter 3

**Thank you guys so much for your great feedback! It's so nice to see the growing interest. Here's chapter 3!**

#### **Mike's POV**

"You're tutoring who?!"

It was the morning after my first day of tutoring and Will had, innocently enough, asked how it had gone for Lucas and I. There wasn't an issue with me telling the guys who I had been assigned to, but it also wasn't something I was jumping at the chance to announce. So it was just lucky for me that Lucas told them.

Dustin was, to say the least, excited.

"El- Elizabeth Hopper," I repeated, as if he really didn't hear Lucas say her name. "It's really not a big deal," I shrugged as I shut my locker.

"Like hell it isn't!" Dustin exclaimed. "Dude, tell us. What's she like?" He pretended to speak for all of them even though he's the only one who actually wants to know.

"She's just normal," I mumbled even though I really didn't know how to answer his question.

"Well, obviously. But like, anything else? You were alone with her for over an hour. I'm sure you learned something."

"I don't know Dustin," I started getting annoyed. "It's only been one session. If anything, I can say she's..." I paused, thinking of something about her that they might not have already known. "unprepared. She didn't have her calculus textbook even though that's what she wanted to go over." Dustin opened his mouth to say something else. "Can we drop it now? I want to get to study hall so I can study for my Spanish test." Without letting him, or any of my friends speak, I turned and walked down the hallway.

I didn't mean to come off like an ass towards Dustin, but I really wasn't up for having a conversation right now, especially one about



his weird crush on El Hopper. It's nothing against her, but this morning hasn't really been one of my best.

The sound of my mom yelling into the phone woke me up before my alarm could.

I would have been more worried about it if it wasn't something I heard frequently nowadays. Unfortunately, my mom telling off my dad about his late child support payments is nothing new in the Wheeler household.

Instinctively, I went to check on Holly, my nine-year-old sister, in her room. Thankfully, she was still sound asleep.

Quietly, I walked into the kitchen, not wanting to say or do anything that would set my mom off even more.

I know she has her faults since I'm sure my dad's imperfections are not all that lead to their divorce a few years ago. Despite it though, there are times when she appears to be a completely different person than who I knew growing up and I knew my dad had a lot to do with that. So whenever I saw her like this, leaning against the wall on her side, not facing me, and shakily taking deep breaths, it made me feel really bad for her and her situation.

Even though the guys knew about my parents, they weren't too familiar with all the details and I sure as hell didn't want to get into it now.

Once I got to study hall, I was not able to focus as much as I would have liked to. I wasn't as strong in Spanish as I was in other classes but I thought it was the easiest of the languages provided. With the workload I've had the past couple of years, I figured taking a language that wasn't as challenging would be a good idea.

Deciding to move on from conjugating verbs, I took a break from Spanish and moved on to something else.

As I was putting back the textbook in my backpack, my eyes landed on my calculus one. I thought of Elizab- El and her failed test.

The tutoring session may not have been for a very long time but I feel

like there was some progress made.

Saying I was surprised at finding out I'll be working with her is an understatement. Given the option to, I never would have guessed it. Call me crazy, but she didn't really strike me as the type of girl to admit she's having trouble in school, let alone do something about it.

Apart from that, given what I know about her, which really is limited to what I've heard around school, I just never would have thought we would make a good... match. Based on how well it went yesterday, however, I guess you can say I've changed my mind.

Of course, it could have gone worse.

In the practice problems I gave her yesterday, I tried to keep it as close to the ones she saw on the exam. To be honest, even though she struggled at some parts, she didn't do too bad, or at least, not as much as I anticipated. I figured if she tried to get ahead, she might be more prepared for the next one and would probably do better.

With that thought, I opened up the book to the chapter following the one El's class was just on.

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## El's POV

"But it wasn't just Louisiana," Mike droned on. "It was hundreds of thousands of square miles of landmass. It ended up like, doubling the size of the United States!"

"Oh," I shrugged and looked away, not really caring about the details of it all.

"Uhh, we can move onto something else if you want...." He trailed off as he reached across the table for another book.

Something like this happens more or else every time we meet up.

We'll start going over class work and he'll soon rant on about something I tune out in a matter of seconds. From what I've gathered about him in the past couple of weeks, he seems to not easily realize when he's not being paid attention to. It's only when I physically

express it that he notices how uninterested I am in what he's saying.

It would have gotten unbearably annoying if it weren't for the fact that studying with Mike is actually really helpful.

There hasn't been a test in any of my classes, so I haven't been able to prove if this whole thing is even working. But I'll admit, I do feel that I'm getting the hang of subjects that I didn't prior to working with Mike. I've even been doing my part about actually showing up to class and paying attention. With all that going on, I can see some improvement, if I do say so myself.

That's what I take into consideration when thinking about whether or not I should ditch tutoring for the day and hang out with the girls instead.

If anything else, this whole experience has made me see Mike Wheeler in a different light.

Instead of being the total nobodies I originally thought they were, Mike, along with his friends, have a reputation as well. Only he is pretty much on the polar opposite end and clearly has the brains that I never will. It's what made me a little hesitant to tell him about my failed math test.

Out of fear that he would think I'm stupid, I knew there was no way I could tell him the truth about why I was really using the tutoring program, or better yet, who signed me up for it. Telling him about the test seemed to be the most honest yet less embarrassing way for me to go.

In the long run, it's not a decision I think I'll regret.

"Sorry for...rambling on like that," he apologized as I saw him pick up my chemistry textbook and bring it close to him.

"No, it's alright," I answered. "I mean, hey if I was as smart as you, I'd be showing it off too." I saw his lips twitch up into a smile.

"Okay," he started as he opened the book onto the desk. "So first I think we should review chapter four-."

"Hey El!"

With wide eyes, not really believing I heard that voice, I looked up and noticed my friends walking towards our table.

"H-Hey, girls," I greeted as I pushed a section of hair behind my ear. Both Max and Kali now stood in front of our table, a small grin on each of their faces. "What are you-?"

"Aren't you going to introduce us to your friend here?" Max said as she gestured to Mike, who, when I glanced over, looked like a deer caught in headlights. I knew it was probably at being in such close proximity to the school troublemakers at once.

"Uh," I wasn't sure if I should say anything about that friend comment or how to go about it if I did. "This is Mike." I didn't mention his last name, thinking that would keep things as casual as possible. "Mike, this is Kali and Max." I didn't make any move to point out which one was which, figuring he could do that on his own.

"Err, uh, hey." He fixed his glasses as he spoke.

"So do you guys need something?" I asked before this became any more awkward.

"I told you she didn't remember," Kali looked at Max and spoke.

Instead of responding directly to her, Max kept her gaze on me.

"El, it's Friday. We had plans after school." I looked at her blankly because, as she knows, lately, my after-school plans involved coming to the library. Next to Max, Kali nodded her head as if that was supposed to help me figure out what she was talking about.

"We have that thing we have to go to today. With..." Max glanced over at Mike, like she was checking if he was listening, "the Babysitter."

Realization hit me then and I knew the girls could tell by the look on my face.

How could I have forgotten about the Babysitter?

"Right." In a quick move, I started closing the book we were using. "Sorry to cut this short today but I have to go," I spoke in Mike's direction, not really waiting for him to respond.

"But we still have to make a study guide for your chemistry test!"

The snort of derision by Kali did not go unnoticed.

Ugh, why did he have to make it sound SO nerdy?

"It's okay," I mumbled. "I'll do it over the weekend," I replied, knowing it likely wouldn't happen.

"You promise?" He spoke seriously, and I almost felt bad for lying.

"Yeah, whatever." It took a few seconds for me to gather my things and zip them all up in my backpack. "See ya."

"Okay. H-Have a good weekend."

"Nice meeting you, Mike!" Max said in a voice that I knew was meant to tease him. Kali laughed besides her, earning a few glances from the students around us. I rolled my eyes so only they could see and led the two of them out of the library, not saying a word.

**So this is kind of filler but we do get into Mike's personal life and a bit into El's internal thoughts. It might seem like a slow progression, but we're getting there guys. You'll see.**

**Up next, we'll finally meet Hopper! I hope you enjoyed this chapter and please review!**

## 4. Chapter 4

**You guys are so nice. Thank you for giving this story a chance and probably more importantly, for the reviews. Now let's see what the girls are up to. Enjoy chapter 4!**

"Shit. El, I think your dad's home," Max whispered, as if Jim could actually hear her from out here.

"Okay," I laughed. "He *does* live here."

As we got closer to my house, I could confirm that he was home based on his Blazer parked next to my car in the driveway.

After our visit to the Babysitter, more formally known as Steve Harrington, we, as always, went to the woods behind my house to use our purchase so no one would easily see us.

Who would ever suspect three teenage girls of smoking pot in the woods behind the chief of police's house anyway?

We didn't realize how late it had gotten and ended up hiding out longer than expected. If it weren't for the fact that we've been exploring and hanging out in these woods for years, who knows how long it would have taken us to figure a way out?

Since Jim was home, I knew it must have been at least after seven.

"I don't know if this is just the weed talking El," Kali spoke with a slight slur to her voice, "but have I ever told you that your dad is insanely hot?"

Max let out a laugh that was very unlike her.

"Eww, Kali! That is so gross!" I exclaimed.

"I'm just telling it like it is," she smirked. "And he's a man in uniform...."

"Ugh, never mind. You're *not* coming in."

"No, I'm sorry! Please let me in. I am so hungry!" She practically begged.

Typically, we would buy a crapload of snacks before we met up with Babysitter. But since we were running late because the girls were waiting for me after school, we didn't have a chance to get anything. He doesn't like tardiness, so now we're relying on whatever food is in my kitchen to keep us at bay. Hopefully, Jim won't suspect a thing as to why we're raiding his cabinets.

We walked up the front steps and just before I opened the door, I turned to them.

"Guys, remember: just... be cool okay?" Neither of them said or did much of anything apart from a nod and I hoped that was a sign that they understood.

I opened the door and noticed the living room light was on and heard the sound of the TV too. I grinned, knowing we wouldn't have to pass him to get to the kitchen.

"El? Is that you?" It was too much to wish that he wouldn't hear us either.

"Hey, Mr. Hopper!"

"Hi, Chief!" Both girls yelled out and giggled at once.

*Real fucking subtle.*

"Hey." I greeted back to him, heading for the fridge while the girls went for the cabinets above the counter. I heard him walk over to the kitchen as well and prepared myself for all the inevitable questions that were about to come.

"Whoa, you girls are hungry." The scuffling behind me stopped and when I turned to look, Max's eyes somehow landed right on Jim.

"Yeah, uhh.... We umm.. We were just-"

"We were doing homework and lost track of time so we haven't eaten anything," I made up to cover Max's stuttering.

"Homework?" Jim asked, clearly not believing me.

"Yeah," I shrugged. "We're having trouble in calculus so we put our brains together and whatever." I chose that subject knowing the girls and I would have a laugh about it later.

"Okay," he spoke, although I could tell he still hadn't let it go.

I looked back into the fridge in search of food but could tell Jim was looking at the three of us intently.

A moment later, we had our hands full of food, me holding a plate of two slices of pizza and a container of chicken wings while the girls held various packages of junk food. Without saying a word, we headed towards my room.

"Don't you wanna heat that up?" I heard Jim call out to me.

"No, it's okay," I called back, knowing I was too hungry to wait for it to warm up. Not to mention, he probably already knew what was going on so he would definitely take that time to bring it up, not caring if we had company or not.

My bedroom door shut behind us a little too loudly and we dumped all the food onto my bed. Kali and Max reached to open a bag of chips just as there was a knock on my door.

"El? Can we talk?" With his muffled tone from the door standing in our way, I couldn't really make out his tone. The three of us looked at each other, eyes full of worry.

"Not right now, dad. I'm changing." I took off one of my shoes and dropped it on the floor, allowing the noise it made to serve as proof.

"Okay, well uh, I just wanted to give you a heads up. I won't be home tomorrow night. I uhh, got somethin' to do. You'll be okay for dinner?"

"Yeah," I replied, not really paying attention.

"Alright," he continued. "Just wanted to tell you in case I don't see you in the morning."



"Okay," I mumbled as I teared into my first bite of pizza.

"Okay," I waited a few seconds since it seemed like he was going to say something else. "Good night girls."

"Night!" They chimed, each with a mouthful of Doritos.

"Do you think he could tell?" Max leaned in to whisper, as if he was listening in. I shrugged, figuring he probably could tell that we were stoned but not really caring if he did.

"What do you think he's got going on tomorrow?" Kali asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Max smirked and shoved Kali.

"Ugh, shut up! I'm just asking."

"I dunno. Maybe it's a work thing," I suggested even though I wanted nothing more than to change the subject.

"He would tell you if it was a work thing," Max spoke at a normal volume this time. "Does he ever go out for work after he comes home?" I shook my head.

"Only if it's an emergency." *Which it hardly ever is around here.*

"So then it's probably not."

"Mmm!" Kali exclaimed. "Maybe he has a hot date."

"Aww, are you jealous?" Max teased again. She flipped her off and Max let out a laugh.

"Whatever. Why are we even talking about this?"

After that, we all stopped talking and instead focused on consuming all the unhealthy food in front of us. A few minutes later, just as the first cords of Aerosmith's *Love in an Elevator* played on the radio, Kali spoke again.

"So, El," and although she was speaking to me, I could have sworn she snuck a look at Max first. "How's the tutoring going?"

I threw her a look, letting her know that that was not a subject I wanted to discuss.

"Yeah, you didn't tell us you were working with Wheeler the Weirdo," Max put in.

"Oh, no?" I hoped they could tell by my tone that not telling them was intentional.

Since my tutoring sessions weren't something we tend to talk about in our free time, I never mentioned that fact that I was working with Mike. It's not like it was a priority for them to find out about it either.

"Don't you find it funny that you got paired up with him?" Kali asked. "I mean, you're... you," I wasn't entirely sure what that meant. "And he's like, the biggest nerd, right?"

*No disagreeing with you there.*

"Seriously," Max started, now lying on my bed. "He's probably into comic books and jerks off to Princess Leia or something," both she and Kali laughed.

Even though a part of me wanted to join in, especially since they were probably right, I felt that it wasn't okay for them to make fun of Mike, who's barely even spoken two words to them.

"He's," I paused, my head feeling a little fuzzy. "not that bad. He's crazy smart and I might actually have a shot at graduating thanks to him."

Based on my tone, Kali and Max shared a look that took to mean they knew something I didn't. Not really wanting to comment on it, I decided to ignore it.

"Jeez, sorry," Kali mumbled, even though she probably didn't know what she was apologizing for.

"We didn't realize it was going to well," Max spoke.

"It's not. I mean, it is. It- it's fine," I struggled to find the right words as I realized how tired I was. "I just hope all the time I'm wasting

going after school is worth it. Wheeler's... a *total* weirdo, but if it's going to help me pass my classes, I'll just have to put up with it. I don't really have much of a choice."

They gave me the same, sympathetic look they had when I first told them I had to go to tutoring.

"Just, you know, don't lose focus," Max raised her eyebrows in a way I couldn't believe.

"Yeah, right," I laughed for the first time since we entered the house as I laid down on my bed as well, placing my head on Max's stomach. "Like that's ever going to happen."

We all giggled as I saw Kali reach for the black nail polish on my dresser and unscrew the cap, spreading it onto her fingernail.

Another song came on the radio and Max's dancing to it had me getting off her. Soon enough, the three of us were swaying and singing along to an older Stones song, forgetting everything and not caring about what we remembered.

It was as if nothing and no one, not Mike Wheeler, my dad, or anyone else existed and I didn't have to worry about anything.

Not even that damn chemistry study guide.

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Never in a million years did I think I would be tracking down the school's biggest geek on a Monday morning to help me study for a test.

But here I am.

I could have just waited to meet with him after school like I normally do on Mondays, but as I passed by the library coming in, the sign taped to the entrance, saying it would closed this afternoon, did not make that a possible option.

At the risk of looking like a crazy person, I walked with my usual strut and posture while my darting eyes did all the work looking for him.

Since I don't know where his locker is (it's not really something I was ever curious about), I knew I only had a limited amount of time to find him before classes started for the day. He really doesn't seem the type that would be late for class.

Finally, right when I was about to give up, I spotted him. By now, I would recognize that head of curly black hair anywhere.

He was taking some things out of his locker so his back was facing me. Luckily, he was completely alone. Without double thinking it, I approached him.

"Hey," I spoke a little more aggressively than I thought. Him jumping and dropping one of his books meant I surprised him as well. I took the chance to roll my eyes as he bent down to pick up what he dropped.

"Uhh, oh, hey, Eliz-El. Hey," he mumbled like a total spaz once he realized it was me.

"So listen," I decided to cut right to the chase. "I had a family thing going on this weekend and I couldn't get that study guide done." He blinked but I knew his attention was on me. I just couldn't tell if he believed my lie or not. "The library is going to be closed today apparently. But if you don't mind, I was wondering if you could help me study for tomorrow." Although I didn't mean for it to happen, I noticed that, as I spoke, my voice sounded more and more... pleading. And he must have sensed it too.

"Uhh, yeah, Mrs. Chapman said they're having a teachers' meeting.... So you couldn't get anything done?"

"No, not really," I decided not to dig myself into a bigger lie if it wasn't necessary. "So what do you say?"

"Umm, sure. I don't really have anything going on...."

"Great!" I sounded far too enthusiastic. "Where do you want to meet?" Of course, had I had it my way, I wouldn't be caught dead anywhere in public with Wheeler, but since it's my fault for getting myself into this, I guess I could put up with it.

"Do umm, do you know that coffee-shop called The Upside Down? On third?"

"I've heard of it, yeah," I told the first truth since I started speaking to him.

"Let's go there. It's quiet so we'll be able to focus and all."

"Alright," I shrugged. "Does 3:30 work for you?"

"Yeah," he nodded shyly.

"Cool. See you then, Wheeler." I turned and walked away from him before he got a chance to say anything else.

**I should preface this by saying I wouldn't consider myself a big Steve fan but I don't mean any harm by making him their weed guy. We will get a little more into him though so don't worry. In this story, he's that guy in town that does that. I'm sure you all know one....**

**Thank you guys so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed and please review!**

## 5. Chapter 5

**Thank for your patience guys! Hope you're enjoying what I've got so far. Here's chapter five!**

### **Mike's POV**

I don't know why I'm even surprised that it's nearly four o'clock and she's not here.

To avoid looking like an even bigger loser, I returned all my supplies to my backpack instead of leaving them ready at our table. Now it looked like I was just meeting someone for coffee instead of preparing for a last-minute study session.

Looking up at the clock on the wall, I watched the seconds tick by, slowly signaling the end of the three o'clock hour. My coffee wasn't only just halfway empty but mostly cold now too. I knew that if I went up to refill it, I would instead just leave altogether.

After what felt like several minutes of tapping my foot impatiently, El walked through the door, immediately sticking out like a sore thumb.

The Upside Down is large enough that she would have had to look around to find me if I wasn't already sitting in plain sight of the main entrance. She sauntered over to the table and nodded once she saw me.

"Hey." She spoke as she got closer. The smell of smoke around her was intense and I figured it must have added to why she was late.

"Hey. Did you find the place okay?" It was the nicest way I could point out her tardiness without sounding like a jerk about it.

"Oh, uhh, yeah. Sorry I'm late. I couldn't find a parking spot." I decided it would be best not to point out what a complete lie that was.

She slid into the seat next to me and dropped her backpack on the table. I noticed that it, thankfully, appeared not to be empty. I started unloading my supplies once again, including my highlighters and

colored pens.

It was hard not to notice the smirk on her face.

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Once we got through putting two weeks' worth of lessons on the study guide, we decided that we should take a break.

I used the time to use the restroom while El went to get a cappuccino and made it back to our table before she did. It was clear that this really was her first time here since she was waiting for her coffee at the counter rather than just waiting for it to be brought to her at the table.

She leaned against it, the tightness of her jeans making it easier to see that she had her legs bent. Although I couldn't see it, she likely had on a bored expression. A few seconds later, she ran her fingers through her hair and tossed some of it back, letting the color shimmer through the air.

It took longer than it should have for me to notice the barista carefully handing her the mug filled with her hot beverage. I quickly tore my gaze away from her out of fear that she would turn back and catch me staring.

She brought the coffee back to our table without spilling a drop and I took the opportunity of her return and our study break to ask her something I'd been curious about at the time and, admittedly, all weekend.

"Do- do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure," she shrugged, probably not suspecting I was about to pry into her personal life.

"Umm, is your- is the uhh, the kid okay?" Although I struggled getting the words out, I knew based on the look on her face that I ended up saying the wrong thing anyway.

"What?"

"On Friday, your friend uh, said you had to go s-see the... Babysitter."

Then, as if she just remembered what happened last week, she laughed and the melodic chime of it rang loud enough for only the two of us to hear.

"The Babysitter, oh." She kept laughing and this time I got a sense that it was directed at me. "I don't know why Max was being so weird about it. It's not like it's some big secret." She moved slightly closer to me. "You probably know him. He's a few years older than us. It's Steve Harrington." I definitely know him.

He's Nancy's ex-boyfriend.

"He just- well, you know...." She trailed off like I was supposed to finish her sentence for her.

My silence likely told her that I didn't know what I was supposed to say.

"He," she leaned in even closer to me and I could feel her breath against my skin, "he sells us weed." She didn't say it in a way like she was admitting a secret, which she just said it isn't. But it was done cautiously, since she surely didn't plan on having to say it out loud.

"O-oh. Cool." Yeah, that was *totally* the right thing to say.

"Yeah, so we already made plans to meet him and all.... It just wasn't something we could flake out on or it'd make us look bad, you know? He takes care of people like that. I guess that's why they call him the Babysitter." She ended with a light laugh, like she just now realized the cleverness of the nickname.

"Uhh, yeah. I get it."

But what I didn't get was why it bothered me so much.

Apart from the fact that her leaving on Friday was plain rude, especially since she has an ongoing commitment at the tutoring program, it was irresponsible of her not to work on the study guide ahead of time, leaving us now to do it last minute. For someone that wants to improve her grades, one piece of evidence being that this meeting was her idea, she doesn't appear to be too interested in putting in any effort.



Deciding not to comment on any of that though, I unzipped the smaller pocket of my backpack and pulled out the Ziploc of Eggos I packed this morning since I was running too late to eat them for breakfast.

At seeing the bag, El's eyes instantly lit up in an almost uncharacteristic way.

"Are those Eggos?"

"Uhh, yeah. Do you want one?" Her smile faltered a bit.

"Umm, sure. If you don't mind." I grabbed a napkin from the holder to clutch onto one of the waffle and hand it to her.

"They're a little cold. It's been sitting in my bag all day."

With how fast she took a bite out of it, I could tell that she really didn't seem to care.

Noticing the look I gave her, she gave a shy smile in return.

"Sorry," she spoke as she put the waffle down. "I usually have a couple after school. They are kind of my favorite."

"Oh, really? Same. My mom is always on my case about not having a 'healthy' breakfast. But it's all I really have time for sometimes, you know?"

"Sure. I get that." I'm not entirely sure if she did or not, but I let myself believe it by the way she nodded and continued eating. "So thanks again for coming today and helping me."

"Yeah. It -it's no problem. I wouldn't really be a good tutor if I let you fail. And it's not like I had anything else planned so...."

"What do you think we'll be working on for Wednesday?" I could tell by her tone that she was genuinely curious.

"Well, I was thinking.... We haven't really been looking at any of your Spanish work. I managed to get a couple of worksheets from Mrs. Alvarez s-so we could do that. I-I was working on some flash cards

for history and I was thinking of some ideas for your final paper for English-. "

"Okay, cool." She nodded, probably not wanting to hear me ramble anymore. "We can figure it out. I didn't realize you were working on all that for me."

"It's no big deal," I shrugged. "I thought it would just be calculus and then you kind of... sprung everything else on me. I mean, not that I mind or anything!"

"It's fine, Mike. I just-. It's a big workload so I-I thought the tutoring would help." The most surprising part about her announcement was how embarrassed she sounded. El looked down at the table and pursed her lips. I could tell that she was tapping her foot and it overall just appeared as if she was considering something.

I knew it would be best if I just kept quiet.

"The thing is," she started after what seemed like forever. "I'm in tutoring because-"

"More coffee?" The interruption came from a different barista than the one who served El her cappuccino. He held up the coffee pot with a small and naïve smile, asking if he could fill up my cup which has been empty since shortly after El arrived.

"No thanks," I spoke quickly, wishing my tone could convey how bad his timing was. With that, he walked away from our table while I turned back to El. "What were you saying?"

"Uhh, nothing," she waved it off, like what she was going to say was something she could send away. "We should get back to work, huh?" As she reached over to pull the papers and textbook closer to us, I looked at her intently, wishing that her confession, or whatever she was about to say, wasn't cut short.

It didn't take as long as I anticipated but we finally finished the study guide. With the promise that she actually would use it tonight to prepare for tomorrow's test, we decided to call it a day.

As we made our way out, I held the door open for her, which must

have surprised her since she gave a small smile in return. Immediately, it was easy to notice how overcast the sky was and the chill in the air made it clear there was a storm quickly coming.

"Where did you park?" She asked, while looking around at the cars parked on the street.

"Oh, I uh," I pointed to the bike rack behind her, where my bike was the only one present.

"What?!" She exclaimed as she turned back around. "Oh, hop in. I'll give you a ride."

"Uhh, no, it's okay. It's not too far-."

"Mike, it's going to pour in a few minutes. Put your bike in the trunk and let's go." She walked around me, keys in hand, to unlock a black car located, as I figured, only a few feet away from The Upside Down.

"Really, El. It's fine."

"It's not a big deal. I'm not going to let you go home in the rain." Noting my expression, I knew she could tell I was still hesitant. "Come on. It's the least I could do."

By the time we pulled into my street it was already pouring out and I knew I would have regretted not accepting a ride home. The lights inside the house were on and my mom's car in the driveway confirmed that she was home.

"Yeah, so it's this one." I pointed to my house, giving her plenty of time to stop in front of it.

"Cute," she commented once she put the car in park. "I would totally expect your place to look like this."

I decided not to linger too much on her thinking what my house looked like and quickly answered.

"It's not exactly the palace you'd get for being the chief's daughter." Realizing I said that without thinking, I shot her an apologetic look. "I-I mean-."

"I wouldn't say my house is anything too fancy either. But hey, it's a roof over my head, Not too much more I can ask for."

"Hehe, yeah." It was quite for a moment and I figured she was waiting for me to leave even though she wasn't going to say anything herself. "So uhh, thanks for the ride," I spoke as I unbuckled my seatbelt.

"Yeah, of course," she spoke as she pulled the lever on her side to open the trunk. Bracing myself before heading out, I pulled open the door and hurried to the back. In a matter of seconds, I yanked my bike out and closed her trunk. Before I headed up towards my house, I bent down at her passenger window, tapped on it with my knuckles, and gave El and quick but surely awkward wave. She returned it in a much cooler way and faced the windshield again.

I could just barely hear the sound of her driving away as I headed up towards my house.

**Please review!**

## 6. Chapter 6

Ahh! My deepest apologies! I don't really blame writer's block this time. Just a severe lack of motivation. Admittedly, I didn't plan for the ending of this chapter to happen so soon but I've decided now is a good a time as any. So I guess there actually *was* some writer's block involved.... Sorry for the wait but I hope you enjoy!

### El's POV

Holy. SHIT.

I stared at the sheet of paper in my hands, unable to believe it. A smile almost broke onto my face, but I was quick to catch it. I haven't seen such a small amount of red pen marks on a returned test in a long time. I also don't think I've ever seen a letter grade so close to the beginning of the alphabet on a science test.

But there it was. That bright, bold "B".

Any facial expression I made went unnoticed over the alarm ringing, telling us all that it was time to change class. This time around, I sprinted out of the room for an entirely different reason.

I felt so damn proud and all I wanted to do in that moment was to share the good news.

Keeping my cool though, I didn't run around the school like some sort of crazy person. Gently holding onto the paper, I let it sway besides me as I walked to and down the hallway, searching for the person I was looking for.

When I did, I was glad to see that he was, once again, alone.

"Mike!" I spoke as I approached him. I couldn't help but notice the excitement in my tone. I hoped that he did too.

"Uh, hey, El," he answered, not jumping in surprise this time.

"So.... guess what?" If the fact that I was talking to him didn't get his

attention, I knew my eagerness would.

"What?" He turned his body towards me. Without saying a word, I held up the test in front of my face, making the letter grade front and center.

"Oh. Wow! That's- that's awesome! This is your chemistry test right?"

"Yes!" I cheered, lowering the paper. "I thought I wasn't going to do good. When I had it in front of me, nothing looked familiar. I thought back to the study guide and everything we went over and- I just got it at the end, I guess."

"That's great." He adjusted his glasses with his index finger. "That's really awesome El."

"Thank you!" I blurted out, not only saying it in response to what he said. "For your help. I- I couldn't have done it without you." With a shrug, he replied.

"You took the test yourself. I just did my job in making sure you knew what you were doing."

"Guess I'm not totally hopeless then, huh?" I tilted my head to the side.

"N-No. I mean, you were struggling at first but that's what the tutori-."

All of a sudden, Mike's body slammed against the lockers, his things fell all around the floor, and laughter was heard throughout our area of the hallway. Turning my head, it was no surprise to see Troy Johnson, the class idiot, with a huge grin on his face.

"Gotta be more careful next time, Wheeler!"

Before Mike could say anything, not that it seemed like he would, I spoke.

"What the *hell* is your problem Troy?"

"Aww, El, what are you doing hanging around this loser anyway?"

"That's none of your business. Now answer my damn question."

"Wheeler and I are just playing around. Aren't we?" He actually had the balls to reach for him.

"Leave him alone." I shoved him away.

"Pfft, whatever babe."

"Don't call me that." I ordered. "Why don't you fuck off and get outta here?" With a roll of his eyes and not another word, he did just that. The same couldn't be said for the crowd he left behind. Drawing my attention to them, I yelled. "Show's over!"

As everyone scattered away, I turned to face Mike again.

"You okay?" I reached down to pick up his things since he was still rubbing his shoulder where it met the lockers.

"Yeah. Uhh, thanks. You didn't have to do that." He mumbled, not meeting my gaze.

I shrugged as I handed everything back to him.

"Troy's an asshole. I don't know why he goes around picking on everyone."

"Heh. You get used to it."

"Dude, are you alright?" I heard the voice from behind me, but I couldn't make out who it was. Based on the direction in which he, and two other guys, came, I assumed they must have seen the crowd that was breaking off and decided to follow it.

It took a couple of seconds, but I managed to recognize the three of them. They're friends of Mike's. I sometimes see them in the cafeteria sitting together and I'm pretty sure one of them also does the tutoring program at a table close to ours.

"Yeah," Mike answered his curly haired friend. "Troy was just bothering me, like always. El seemed to scare him off though." He glanced at me with a small smile. Then, as if Mike saying that caused

his friends to notice there was someone else with him, they all turned to look at me.

"Hey," I nodded. Their eyes widened at that and they looked at me like I had two heads.

To try not to make it any more awkward, I thought it was best to leave.

"So umm, I have to go." I faced Mike again. "Thanks again. For everything. And uh, if Troy gives you any more trouble, just let me know okay?" Out of my entire encounter with Mike, I felt like that was the one thing I should not have said.

"Sure," he replied. "And uh, thanks." I nodded, letting him know it was no problem.

"See ya," That was directed at his friends and at least this time when I spoke to them, they managed not to look like they just wet themselves.

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I rode with Kali to school this morning and since we're hanging out with Max right after, I had her stop by my house so I could grab a jacket. Just before I got out of her car, she and I looked at each other, questioning the unfamiliar car in the driveway.

Deciding not to worry about it too much, I went into the house where the mystery of the other car was... kind of answered.

"Oh, uhh, hey kid," Jim called out from his position on the living room carpet. He was in his sheriff's uniform, sitting with one leg bent towards him and the pulled up to his chest in front of the coffee table. A nearly empty box of pizza was on it.

And there was a woman sitting next to him.

"You're home early."

"It's after three."

"Already?" Instead of answering, I looked away, knowing the only



other option was to look at his guest.

"El," he cleared his throat, like he was about to say something important. "This is Joyce."

I decided to look over at her, mostly because I knew Jim would say I was being rude later if I didn't.

"Hi," she spoke quietly.

Joyce had on a small smile, almost as if she were nervous to meet me (not that I can imagine why). She was sitting crossed-legged, so I couldn't really make out how tall she was. Her hair was the same plain brown color of nearly every woman her age in town and ran a little past her shoulders. She also didn't have on any makeup.

"Hey," was all I could think to say. "I-uh just stopped by for a jacket," I explained to Jim. "I'm going out." I walked in the direction of my room, not giving him too much of a chance to say anything.

Marching into my room, I let the door close shut behind me. I grabbed my jacket that was at the foot of my bed and tried not to think about the feminine laughter I heard from the living room or whatever stupid joke Jim must have said to make it happen.

Deciding to fix my eyeliner, I spent a couple of minutes in front of the mirror getting that done. A part of me knew that I was trying to avoid whatever was going on in the other room. Since I had Kali waiting for me though, I knew I couldn't just hide in here forever.

With a deep breath, I opened the door and made sure to close it before I walked into the rest of the house.

It's not that I thought they wouldn't be able to see me, but that didn't stop my eyes from rolling when Jim spoke.

"Don't be home late."

"Yeah," I replied, not looking back.

"It was nice to meet you, um, Elizabeth."

Surprised, since I wasn't really expecting her to say anything, I turned back around.

"Uh, yeah. You too." Without another word, I left.

As I walked to meet Kali at the end of the driveway, I dug out my box of cigarettes from my jacket pocket and pulled one out.

"Did you find out who that is?" She nodded in the direction of the other car as I opened the door and hopped back into hers.

"No," I shrugged and reached for the lighter in her glove compartment "Don't worry about it. Let's go."

---

"So, what do you guys wanna do this weekend?" Two weeks have passed since I got my chemistry test result and saw Jim with his new friend. I took a history test earlier today and to take my mind off it, I asked the girls what they wanted to get up to.

We were by the bleachers out on the track and I spoke to them as I laid down on one of them, dangling my cigarette on my fingers.

"I'm actually going to visit my grandma with my folks," Max said as she pulled the crust off her sandwich and dropped it on the ground. "We're leaving Friday after school to get there by dinnertime and we'll be there all weekend." I could tell by her tone that she wasn't all that excited about it.

"Shit," I answered. "What about you?" I asked Kali, who was sitting on the same bench I was using and gently nudged her with my foot.

"I'll be out of town too," She took another drag. "We're going to go visit my brother in Chicago since he has some internship and won't be able to come down for Thanksgiving." I let out a frustrated sigh. "Sorry."

"Nah, it's alright," I sat up, reaching into my backpack for the lunch I packed. "I'll just... find something else to do."

As if hearing neither of them would be here this weekend wasn't bad enough, I had another tutoring session with Mike today after school.

Seeing the look on my face after he asked how the history test went was plenty for him to not mention it again and for that, I was grateful.

I slouched in my seat as Mike went over the assignment I had just finished, barely paying attention. I could think of hundred other things I'd rather be doing than Spanish classwork.

A couple of tables down, I caught his friend, one of the ones that was in the hallway the day of the Troy incident, staring over at us from a few tables away. I raised my eyebrow at him, silently asking him what he was looking at. He glanced away, not seeming embarrassed at all.

"Okay, good," Mike started, causing me to sit up. "Couple of small errors but it's better than last time."

"Cool, thanks," I replied as he handed me back my notebook after closing it.

"Looks like it's time to go," he nodded up to the clock on the wall while putting his things into his backpack. After a quick look at the time, I followed along.

As we've been doing for that past couple of weeks, since we head in the same direction anyway, we left the library together. Mike dragged on about the improvement he's seen in certain subjects and something on how he wants to know about the history test whenever I'm willing to talk about it.

Soon we were past the front doors of the school and just before we separated, him towards the bike rack and me towards the parking lot, he spoke.

"So I'll see you on Monday."

"What?" Before I could say anything else, he pushed his glasses up his nose for the third time since I've seen him. "I thought we *are* meeting this Friday. Because we didn't last week."

"I mean, everyone else is, but uh, I have- I have something to do."

"Oh. What?" It might have been nose, but seeing as he has never said he was going to take a day off tutoring, I can't really be blamed for being curious.

"It's um.... It's actually my birthday."

"Ohh!" I exclaimed, probably a little too loudly, as I playfully crossed my arms. "I see. Well, I wouldn't want to come in either," I shrugged. "How old are you turning?" I asked, even though it could only be so many options.

"Eighteen," he spoke with the smallest amount of confidence ever.

"Nice," I nodded my approval, not that he really did anything. "So you're going to party?" Even though I knew the answer, I figured it'd be polite, not to mention, funny, to ask.

"Umm, no. I just would rather not come in for tutoring. Especially since it's a Friday. No offense or anyt-."

"No, it's cool. I just said I wouldn't have come in either."

"Oh okay," he looked down at his shoes.

"Well, if I don't see you until then," which I likely won't, "have a happy birthday. You definitely deserve it."

"Thanks," he smiled. "Have a good weekend."

Moving my hair out of face, I replied, "Bye Wheeler."

**It may not seem like it, but this is the longest chapter of the story so far. There's been a lot of progress made, if I do say so myself. Next chapter is super exciting, so I hope you guys will stick around for it. Once again, I'm so sorry for taking so long! Please review if you can!**

## 7. Chapter 7

**Thank you so much for your patience and encouraging reviews!  
Here's chapter seven!**

### **El's POV**

"Oh, this one is sick! I love it." I exclaimed as I pointed at the drawing in the catalogue in front of me.

"Which one? Lemme see," Axel yelled as he came out of the stockroom and towards me, leaning on the counter. "Nice," he nodded as he looked at my choice. "Yeah, Dottie designed that one. Where would you get it?"

"Uhh, I don't know. Maybe my foreman?"

"You sure your dad would be okay with that?" He asked with raised eyebrows.

"It's not like I need his permission," I snapped back. Axel chuckled and called out to Dottie, his girlfriend and co-owner of the best tattoo shop in town. Together, the three of us flipped through some of their new designs in the, seemingly never-ending, search for my first tattoo.

Having known them for a little over a year (and being the only tattoo artists I know personally) I knew I could trust them to ink me for the first time. Having come for both Max and Kali's tattoos, I've gotten close to them and decided to take some time from my very open weekend to see if I can make any progress and/or finally make an appointment.

Another forty minutes or so, and having made no progress, much to their dismay, I decided to head out. As we were exchanging good-byes, I explained to them that Kali and Max were out of town.

"Oh, so then what are you doing tonight?" Dottie asked as she popped her gum.

"I've got nothing going on," I shrugged.

"We're having a party at our place if you want to stop by."

"That sounds awesome. I'll be there!"

"Cool," he nodded. "Come by around nine."

"Sounds good." And then, before I really thought about it: "Can I bring a friend?"

---

Dottie and Axel's shop is located downtown, which, since I found myself having to run some errands anyway, was convenient.

My final stop was Melvald's mainly so I could stock up on Eggos since I was down to my last half package.

I pushed the cart into the store and walked straight to the frozen aisle, already being so familiar with the layout.

Just as I was rounding the corner, I saw something that nearly made me turn away.

I may have only seen her once but already I felt that I could not forget that face, even in profile. Looking up at that different brands of flour, wearing light blue scrubs, was Hopper's friend he introduced me to a couple of weeks back.

I stood there, frozen and unsure of what to do. I considered turning and looking at the different flavored cans of frosting, pretending to be interested in them so hopefully she wouldn't see me. Turning back and running out of the aisle would only draw attention to myself.

In a last second move, and because I noticed her turn just slightly in my direction, I did just that.

"Hey, I found some." It wasn't a familiar voice, but it was loud enough for me to hear from where I was standing.

"Thanks honey. I knew you guys had a new shipment of these come in," Joyce said to the teenage boy who handed her two packs of what looked to be chocolate chips.

While I may not have remembered his voice, I could recognize his face. He and Joyce shared enough features -plain brown hair, pale skin, short and skinny- to convince me that they are probably related. But that fact that they look alike is not what makes me think I've seen him before.

I've seen him around school.

Looking as intently as I could without getting caught, I realized that he's one of Mike's friends.

The theory I had that they were related was confirmed when I saw her kiss his forehead and he groaned out in embarrassment.

Before I could prepare myself though, he spotted me and the look he gave me was unfortunately, noticed by Joyce too.

"Elizabeth! Hi, I didn't see you over there," she spoke, completely unaware of how awkward this was.

"Hi," I spoke as I approached them, "Umm, it's just El." As I got closer, I clearly noticed that Mike's friend was shying away, a much more appropriate response.

"Oh, okay then." By the way she smiled, I could tell she thought me allowing her to call me El was a bigger deal than it actually was. "This is my son Will," she gestured to him. "you two might have seen each other around school."

"Yeah," I confirmed. "You're Mike's friend right?"

"Uh, yeah," he replied nervously, reminding me a lot of Mike when I first met him.

"Oh, you know Mike! That's great," Joyce explained even though I couldn't think of why that was good news.

"Yeah," I trailed off, no longer wanting to talk about Mike. Instead, I shifted my focus to something else that caught my attention. "I didn't know you had a son." I smiled with a bit of mischief behind it.

It may have been uncalled for but I'm not an idiot.

Whatever relationship she had going on with Hopper, I hoped it was one where she was honest about her and any family she has.

If not, I'm sure Jim would love to be updated on it.

"I have two," she smiled, not even aware of what was going on. "But Johnathan is actually away at college."

*So she has an even older son?*

"Oh, cool," I nodded, looking at each of them. "Well, I should get going." I spoke, not wanting to be here any longer.

"Oh, okay," she repeated. "Bye dear. Have a good weekend."

"Yeah, you too. Bye Will," I gave a small wave out of politeness.

"Bye."

Without looking back, I pushed my cart around them and headed towards the frozen food section.

---

"So... any plans for tonight?" I asked as I moved my fork around the lasagna that was frozen a mere twenty minutes ago. It was my not so subtle way of trying to see if Hop would be seeing Joyce tonight so I could have a reason to bring her up. Since he seems to spend nearly every weekend out lately, presumably with her, I figured it's a safe bet.

"I'm workin'", he explained. "We're short staffed since we got the guys keeping watch over the farm."

"Oh, right," and I knew he wasn't lying either. Ever since the robbery at the farm last week, there's been a couple of cops guarding the place every night, causing Jim to fill in when needed.

Since it seemed I wouldn't have an easy way in, I thought about forgetting it altogether. After all, it would be really weird if I just randomly brought her up.

"What'd you get up to today?"



Bingo.

"I umm.." I cleared my throat, knowing I needed a surge of confidence for this. "I was at the store picking up a couple of things-."

"Guess that explains the dozen boxes of Eggos in the freezer," he mumbled though I still heard him completely.

"And I uhh," I continued on as if I hadn't heard him. "I ran into your friend. Joyce."

"Did ya?"

"Yeah, it was on my way to the freezer section," and then, because I didn't know how else to continue, I spoke. "So did you know she has a son?"

"Yeah, Will. He's your age, I think."

"Uh, yeah," To hear him confirm it, let alone know his name *and* his age threw me off a little, since I hadn't expected it. I was planning to surprise him with the news after all. "So isn't that kind of weird? Since you're like, always hanging out and whatever."

"What are you saying?"

"I guess... how much has she really told you about herself? Since you're... *seeing* her and everything, what do you actually know about her?"

"Where do you get that from?"

"Huh?"

"That I'm *seeing* her," he used just as much emphasis on the word as I did.

"You- well you... you're with her all the time. You've brought her to the house. And she's weirdly nice to me so I just figu-."

"Why don't you just let me handle that? It's probably better if you stay out of it."

"I'm just saying. I mean, she kind of came out of nowhere. And she has a son my age so that's kind of strange."

"Drop it kid. That's my business."

"She has another son too you know."

"EL," he said in the stern voice I hear way too often.

"Fine. Just- shit, sorry. I didn't know it would bother you so much."

He must have seen or sensed how bad I felt for him to say what he said next.

"Look," he sighed, putting down his fork. "If it starts... going that way with Joyce, you'll be the first to know."

"I'll be the only one to know," I said with a smile, teasing him for his lack of friends.

"Yeah, okay," he chuckled. "Alright, I gotta get going," he announced as he reached for my plate.

"No, it's okay. I got it."

"Yeah? Got nothing better to do tonight?" I knew it was a jab at my usual unwillingness to wash dishes.

"I do. Just... not for another couple of hours." Once I saw his eyebrows raise, I knew I needed an explanation. "I'm going out. With a friend."

"I thought you said Max and Kali were out of town?"

"Yeah, they are," I spoke as I stacked my plate over his and placed the silverware on top. "I can have other friends."

Putting his hands up in surrender, he answered. "Just don't be home late." He gave his usual semi-warning he used nearly every time I said I was going out.

Jim left for the station a few minutes after that. A couple of hours

later, I was also heading out the door to Axel and Dottie's place. There was just one stop I had to make first.

---

I guess it was good that I was parked out on the street instead of on his driveway because I don't want anyone to see me from their window.

As I exhaled another deep breath, I drummed my fingers against the steering wheel, wanting to delay my next move for as long as possible.

Damn it, I knew this was a bad idea.

It's not too late to turn back. It's not like I would be at this party alone. I know the hosts and I've met some of their friends at the shop before.

Besides Mike's probably busy.

Okay, maybe not. But there's no guarantee he'll want to come. It doesn't really seem to be his scene, as far as I can tell.

But I guess I won't *truly* know until I ask him. And I might as well. I mean, I'm already here.

Come on El. Just open the door, get out of the car, and go.

What's the worst that could happen?

Before I knew it, I was at his front door, pushing my index finger against the doorbell, and waiting what seemed to be forever for an answer.

Once the door was wide enough, I spoke.

"Hi!" I immediately noticed how unlike myself I sounded. It only added to the awkwardness at seeing that it was not Mike who answered the door.

Instead a thin girl of average height who looked like she could be a few years older than me stood at the door. She wore pink pajama

bottoms with black polka dots and had an unzipped blue sweater on. I figured this had to be Nancy.

The curious look she gave me did nothing but confirm it.

"Can I help you?"

"Uh, yeah," and for some reason, being confronted by Mike's older sister, even though she didn't at all look intimidating, made me slightly nervous. "Is, uh, is Mike home?" Before she spoke again, she gave me a quick once-over that was hardly subtle.

"You want to see Mike?" she asked it as if I hadn't already said that.

"Yeah. If that's cool." I realized then, that if I were in her shoes, I wouldn't allow this stranger standing at my front door to see my brother either. "Sorry, I'm El. I'm a... friend of his. From school."

"From school?" she repeated. I knew she was judging based on her narrowed eyes.

"Yup!" I figured amping up the pep might make her believe me.

"Uh, sure," she nodded. "I'll go get him," she pointed back towards the house.

"Great, thanks," I gave her a small smile as she closed the door.

**Well, I guess we know who El's plus one will be to this party. Let's just hope he's up for tagging along.... A reminder to please follow me on Twitter for fun little features and sneak peeks. I'm at D13Tribute and I DO follow back!**

**Thanks so much for reading! If you're up to it, please review!**

## 8. Chapter 8

**Last new chapter before the new year! Here's chapter eight!**

### **Mike's POV**

"Come in," I mumbled in response to the knock on my bedroom door. I hoped that whoever it was, Holly or Nancy, needed something important. I was finally getting the hang of this physics homework and would prefer not to be bothered.

"Hey," Nancy said as she entered and approached my desk where I was working, its lamp being the only light source in the room. "So there's someone here to see you."

"Who is it?" I asked, my interest slightly piqued since I wasn't expecting visitors. I figured it wasn't any of the guys, since Nancy wouldn't be so mysterious about it and just let them in.

"She said she's a friend from school. Emily, Ethel-".

"El?" My head shot up at the same time I dropped my pencil. Was she serious? "She-she's here?"

"Yeah, she's at the front door. I told her I'd come get you. Do you really know her from school?"

"Yeah, I'm tutoring her," I spoke, hoping that it would be all the explanation needed. It was the truth after all. "Did she say what she wants?" My body was turned towards her now, giving her all my attention.

"No.... Do you want me to tell her you're not here?"

"No!" I stuck my hand out to stop her. I had a feeling El wouldn't believe her anyway. "I'll-I'll go see her." I followed Nancy out of the room and down the stairs, my curiosity growing with each second and step. We parted ways at the living room, where Nancy went back to watching TV. Once I reached the front door, cautiously, for some reason, I turned the knob and opened it.

"Ah, there you are," as casually as if she comes to my house at night all the time.

"Yeah." Closing the door behind me, I immediately started shaking at how cold I felt in my thin cotton long sleeve and Chewbacca print pajama pants. I took a quick look at her and wondered if she was cold in the dress and light jacket she was wearing. "So uh, what are you doing here? Uhh, I mean, what- what's up?"

"There's a party going on tonight at a friend of mine's house. If you want to come." She said that last part with a shrug, almost as casual as her invitation.

"Oh, uh." I struggled to find words. Even if I had them, I knew I wouldn't be able to put them together.

"I know it's super last minute so I get it if you can't. I didn't know if you had plans or anything." At this, she looked down and saw what I was wearing. I knew she answered her own question as to whether or not I had plans.

"Uh, sure. I'll go," I agreed without fully thinking it over. I did know, however, that the alternative would be staying home on a Saturday night like some friendless loser.

"Great!" El exclaimed a bit too enthusiastically. "But you should probably change." She advised with a nod in my direction. "It's casual, but it's not *that* casual."

"Yeah. Um, okay. Come in, you can wait inside while I get dressed," I spoke as I put my hand on the doorknob.

"Oh, it's fine. I can wait out here."

"Are you sure? It's kind of cold."

"It's okay. I need a smoke anyway." The thought of her staying out here to do that didn't really thrill me.

"Okay. I'll be done in a few minutes."

"I'll be here."

I don't think I've ever made it up to my bedroom from the porch faster. The good thing about El seeing me in my pajamas is that she can't see me in anything worse. Whatever I wear now would be an improvement.

Pulling open my drawer and opening up my closet, a surge of nervousness rushed over me. It wasn't so much at the fact that I had no idea what to wear but about where I was going. Not to mention, of course, who I was going with.

I never expected that El would be the person at my front door, just like I never could have predicted what she was here for. I barely knew how to react, because well, it's not every day I get invited to a party, especially by someone like El.

I pulled a clean pair of jeans out of my drawer and switched out of my pajama pants like they were on fire. As I was doing that, I racked my brain thinking about what else I should wear. Not wanting to keep El waiting, I knew I had to be quick.

Within a couple of minutes later, I found myself running down the stairs so fast, I nearly fell.

"Bye Nance," I turned my head to her as I was heading out the door.

"Whoa, whoa. Hold on. Where are you going?" I figured she would ask.

"Just going out. With a friend." I added as I adjusted my glasses. "I'll be back soon."

"Mike, are you sure? You know this girl?" I knew better than to sarcastically reply that I was in fact going out with a total stranger.

"Yes, it's fine. El's cool." I spoke fast so I could leave, since El probably thought I was taking too long.

"Whatever," Nancy put her hands up in surrender, even though I knew she was still concerned, and went back to the living room. I put my jacket on as I approached the front door.

She was blowing smoke out as I saw her.

"Alright, I'm ready," and by the look on her face, I could tell there was something wrong.

"I guess if it gets cold you can always zip up your jacket," she commented and I immediately knew it wasn't a good idea to wear my Dungeons and Dragons T-shirt. "Okay, let's go." She led me down the path and walked until we reached her car. I suppose she left it unlocked while she was at my house since the passenger door was already opened. As the chief's daughter, I guess car theft isn't something she really has to worry about.

She took a few seconds to stomp out her cigarette on the pavement before getting into the car and turning it on. I only noticed she didn't have her seatbelt in until after I clicked mine together.

We drove in silence for a couple of minutes until she spoke.

"So that was your sister?" Even though I never saw them interact, I knew she was talking about who originally opened the door for her.

"Uh, yeah. Nancy," and in that moment, for some reason, I feared Nancy might have said something to embarrass me.

"Yeah, I figured," she continued, not letting on that Nancy might have said anything out of line. "What's she doing in town? I thought you said she was away at college?"

After internally recovering from the fact that she remembered that, I answered.

"She won't be able to come for Thanksgiving weekend so she came for this one instead. It worked out with it being my birthday and all."

"That's nice," I could tell that a small smile was forming on her face. "Sounds like she really cares about you." Since we were on the topic, I wanted to ask if she had any brothers or sisters, even if I already knew the answer.

Instead, I changed subjects.

"So this party...." I trailed off, not having anything prepared besides that.



"Yeah, it's at a friend of mine's place," she repeated. "I don't know if you'll know anyone, but they said I could bring someone so it's cool."

"Oh," I let out, not really knowing what to make of that. "Ar-are we going to pick up your other friends? Or will they meet us there?"

"Kali and Max aren't coming," she spoke matter-of-factly. "They're both out of town." My mouth must have stayed open for longer than I thought. "That won't be a problem, right?" She asked when I wouldn't speak.

"No!" I shook my head as reinforcement. "Th- that's fine."

---

About ten minutes later, we must have arrived because El stopped the car. We were parked right on the corner, where anyone else wouldn't normally be allowed. Just another parking privilege, I guess.

"We're here," she confirmed as she shut off the engine. It was no question as to which house the party was in, based on the loud music and people out on the front porch. I was too busy looking to notice that she got out. Quickly, I did too and this time, she locked the car.

"So they're tattoo artists at a shop downtown," she began explaining as we walked towards the house. "And they like to practice their designs on themselves. So don't get... thrown off when you see them or anything. I'll point them out if I see 'em."

As we made our way into the house, El waved back and said hi to some people. I could tell that it wasn't just to be polite and that she really did know them, especially since it continued as we entered the house. Once we were inside, she stopped and looked around, probably searching for our host. When she started walking again, I assumed that she did.

"Axel, hey!"

We walked into another room where a skinny guy with hair spiked into a mohawk and dyed pink turned to face us once El got his attention. He was seated at a large table with a group of people appearing to finish up a card game. When he saw El, he got up and

gave her a one-armed hug.

"You made it!"

"Told you I would," she said with a shrug. "Where's Dottie?"

"She's out on a beer run with Mick."

I saw El nod at his response and then turn around, probably to make sure I was still there. Even though I was standing close enough to hear what they were saying, she waved me over to get closer.

"Guys, this is my friend Mike," before she said my name, I would have sworn she was talking about somebody else.

She's never called me her friend before.

"Be nice to him okay? His birthday was yesterday." What followed was a series of cheers and hollers, which completely took me by surprise seeing as they just found out this information.

As it died down, the guy at the end of the table who was shuffling cards spoke out loud.

"What's your shirt say?"

"Um, it's D&D. Dungeons and Dragons!" I clarified quickly, thinking he may not know.

"What's that?" said a girl with a look on her face that said she didn't know what I was talking about.

"It's a game," I nervously answered.

"What, like a board game?" This time, it came from Axel. Since he appeared to be the leader, the party thrower, and El's friend, I felt like I needed to impress him.

"Kind of. Uh, it's a fantasy adventure game where everyone role-plays a different character. There's a person called the Dungeon Master who's in sort of in charge of everything. And he-." I couldn't be one hundred percent certain, but I thought I heard one or two people

laugh. I took it as a sign that I should stop talking.

"Stuff's in the kitchen?" El, who didn't say anything about me talking about D&D, directed the question at Axel.

"Yeah, help yourself," he answered her but looked at me instead.

"Cool. Let's go," she spoke to me before turning around and leaving the room. A few steps later, we ended up in the kitchen.

Since we were the only other people in the room, besides someone raiding the fridge, I didn't understand what we were doing here when everything was clearly going on outside these doors.

That is until I saw the multiple bottles of alcohol on the table.

"Alright," she spoke with her back facing me. "I think you're going to have to loosen up a little bit." When she turned back around, she had a red plastic cup in each hand. "Just drink this. In one go." She extended her arm out to give me one. "I'll take one with you. But only one, since I'm driving and all."

"What is it?" I asked while looking into the cup since I didn't see which bottle she poured from.

"It's... vodka," I noticed the hesitation, almost as if she didn't want to tell me. I moved my cup and the liquid sloshed around. "Mike, it's okay. One drink is not going to kill you. And I'm driving you home anyway, remember?" It was hard to forget since she just mentioned it as the reason she's taking only one drink.

By anyone else, her words might have been taken to be pushy, but to me it felt more like an encouragement.

In response, I lifted up my cup towards her, slightly higher than she had before.

"Cheers."

She playfully rolled her eyes and smiled before indulging me in clinking our cups together.

**Thank you all so much for reading! Please review if you can and I hope you have, or had, a great holiday season!**

## 9. Chapter 9

**Alrighty, so! Let's see what these two are up to.**

**El's POV**

*Where the hell is that kid?*

Now, more than I had all night, was I beginning to regret this plan. I knew I should have just driven off and away once I made it to Mike's house. But I also knew it would be an interesting night, and damn it, I was curious to see just how much.

And now, he's lost. I don't even know how this happened. It's not like Axl and Dottie's place is *that* big.

I directed him to the bathroom when he asked where it was. I didn't think he was lying about it since by then he had a couple of shots in him and I sure as hell don't know when the last time he went to the bathroom was. I told him I'd be waiting in the kitchen and that was about an hour ago. I hadn't realized how quickly time passed since a couple of people stopped by and we would chat for a bit. But one I glanced up at the time on the stove, I knew something was wrong.

So without wanting to feel like I was looking for my lost kid in the supermarket, I set out to find him.

It wasn't like there were so many places he could be. It's also good that he doesn't know anyone because, really, what are the odds that someone Mike knows, let alone his friends, would be here? Just like Mike, this doesn't really seem to be their scene.

It's safe to assume Mike was with his friends last night for his actual birthday. I don't really want to think about how they celebrated both because it's not my business and also, I imagine it's probably the most boring thing ever. Maybe something like a Star Wars movie marathon or some special edition of that board game he mentioned earlier. Curiosity almost got the better of me in the car and I asked. But since I couldn't guarantee my reaction and I didn't want to make him nervous or insecure for what I figured was his first party, I decided

not to. Apart from the recent act of getting lost, I'd say things were going well.

He, as I expected, was home and didn't have any plans for a Saturday night. Noticing he was in pajamas, I did think he probably wouldn't want to and was just going to turn in early. Thankfully, he was up to it and seeing as that was the hardest part, I thought everything would be smooth sailing. It wasn't even as hard as I thought it would be to get him to drink. But now it seemed, that was the exact reason for my problem.

However, a quick search of the basement answered the question of where Mike went.

There, standing on one end of the table pushed to the far back, his curly head bobbing a little too hard to the current AC/DC song that was playing, was my tutor and the smartest guy I know.

I carefully stepped towards him because whatever was going on, I kind of didn't want to interrupt it.

"Hey Mike," I spoke loud enough to be heard over the music. It caught his attention too since he turned to me, no longer focused on throwing the ball he was holding into a cup on the other side of the table.

"El, hey! What's up?" I have never, despite the short amount of time I've known him, heard him sound so calmly confident.

"I was looking for you. You kind of escaped from me back there."

As Mike was opening up his mouth to speak, someone across the way beat him to it.

"Ey, you going to shoot or what?" asked one of Mike's beer pong opponents.

"He's taking a break!" I answered for him as I put the weightless ball down on the table and pulled him away. "You okay?" As we got closer, I could easily smell the alcohol on his breath and could only imagine how many drinks he had.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good," he replied in a way that was so unlike himself.

"Hmm," I hummed, thinking he probably wasn't. "Where'd you run off to, huh? I thought you were going to the bathroom." I didn't intend for it to sound the way it came out, like an interrogation after arresting him. Hopefully, he didn't see it that way.

"I was- I mean, I did. I went looking for you and couldn't find you. And then these guys came up to me and I guess they knew who I was and gave me this cup full of like a lot more of what you gave me. Then we came down here and started playing. I think this is like the third game," he ended sheepishly and out of breath, while pushing up his glasses. With all his slurring and chopping up off words, I could barely piece together what he said.

"Okay," I replied with a slow nod, so he got that I more or less understood. "But you feel alright?" While this was all extremely amusing, it didn't really go as I had anticipated. The point of bringing Mike out tonight was both as a birthday gift and to see if he was able to loosen up and have some regular teenage fun. By losing him, anything that happened became out of my control. But from what I can see, things didn't turn out half bad.

"Yeah, all good," he used similar words that he had last time with an intense gaze that I hadn't seen him use before.

The look he gave me, with his dark framed eyes staring into my heavily eyelined ones, lured me in. I then trusted him when he said he was alright and strangely enough, I felt that he would make me feel alright too.

It was harder than I would like to admit to look away.

"So umm, do you want to head out?" I spoke, finally getting my breath back.

"Nah," he answered again in an uncharacteristic way. "We just got here." And with that, he turned and walked back to continue the beer pong game, leaving me surprised and practically paralyzed. After what seemed like forever, I was able to move and decided it was

probably better not to be in the same room as Mike for both, but mainly, my sake.

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It wasn't very long until it felt like Mike was never my guest to begin with. After leaving the basement, I made my way through the house and eventually ran into some friends I hadn't seen in a while. Between going out for a smoke and catching up, it really felt like old times, with the exception of me not being able to drink.

Normally, when I'm out with the Kali and Max, we would choose a DD ahead of time. Having put myself in that position this time, it was what reminded me that I had come with Mike. And that led me to think about how much he must have had to drink by now.

It was getting late and to be honest, I was getting concerned. As far as I know, this is his first real night out, probably ever. I couldn't have him get into any danger on me. That was sure as hell something, I did not want to deal with.

With a little bit of reluctance, I said my goodbyes and made my way to the basement from out in the lawn. It didn't take very long to see that he was no longer there.

From the house, stumbling and nearly tripping over his long limbs came Mike. Afraid he was going to crash into something or someone, I caught up to him. He looked completely different to when we first arrived at the party and not necessarily in a good way. The best way to describe it was that he looked like he was about to hurl.

God, this was embarrassing. It might have been dark, but if I could spot him, so could anyone else. If I considered myself lucky that not many people knew he and I came together, that luck was about to end.

"Mike," I spoke, letting him know I was here. "Are you okay?" As fucked up as it was, I held in my laugh successfully. Of course, he wasn't okay. At the same time though, I felt a pang of guilt because, after all, it was my fault he and, I guess, we were in this situation.

Thinking fast, I knew exactly what to do, if anything because I had



done it so many times by now.

Linking arms with him, and putting most of his weight on me, we headed back towards my car, trying to seem as normal as possible and attracting the least amount of attention . Not making an eye contact with anyone, we made our way there as discreetly as we could. It went so well that when he finally threw up, just a couple of feet away from the car, no one noticed, and it spared us both the humiliation.

It was a relief from me, and based on the sounds of retching from him, it was one for him too.

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Nearly forty minutes later, I stood impatiently as some long-haired pale guy with an eyebrow piercing who couldn't look more miserable if he tried, rang me up. Unlike most times when I'm in a convenience store this late, I didn't have to endure small talk or the occasional judgmental look, and that was just fine with me.

"Thanks," I barely let out as shoved the change he handed me into my jacket pocket. I swiftly walked to and through the entry door, making my way to the curb in front of my car, only few feet away. There, with his head between his legs, trying to get into a decent enough shape to get home, was Mike.

"Okay, so," I started as I began pulling out a bottle of water and twisting the cap. "We need to get you hydrated. Here." I held the plastic bottle out to him and looking over to make sure it was, in fact, water he took it.

As I watched him chug half of it, I reached over to the bag of potato chips I bought and tugged it open, breaking the seal. In an unlike Mike move, he moved and grabbed a handful. "Those were for me, but okay...." Trailing off, I moved my finger under the small metal ring and popped open my can of Red Bull. Moving it to the other side so Mike wouldn't try to get it, I nodded towards the bag.

"The rest of it is for you."

"Oh. Uhh, what for?"

"For the killer hangover you're going to have in the morning," I spoke bluntly, knowing he wasn't going to be prepared for what's coming. "So there's some Advil, a bottle of OJ, breath mints if you think your mom or whatever will see you. Just rest and drink lots of water and you should be okay."

"Uhh, thanks," by the way he ducked his head down, I could tell he was slightly embarrassed by it all. "Here, let me pay you back."

"Oh, no it's alright. This," I gestured to him, "is payment enough." I let out a small laugh so he would know I was just teasing him and luckily, based on his smile, he seemed to get it.

I picked up the lighter I also bought and lit up a cigarette, holding it between my lips for a few seconds. Mike swallowed another gulp of water before speaking.

"That's really bad for you, you know," he said it very abruptly, almost as if he decided to tell me at the last second.

Knowing it was the alcohol talking, I smirked and blew out the smoke dangerously close to his direction.

"I didn't realize you were also tutoring me in health."

"Well, it sure looks like you need it," he snapped with no hesitation.

"Says the guy who got plastered off a few vodka shots and cheap beer."

"And whose fault is that?"

"You're an adult now." I said it as if he didn't know. "You can make your own decisions and do whatever you want."

"Not everything."

Close. He was so close.

I pulled away, making it look like I was taking another drag though it really was to move away from him. As I blew out smoke I let out a shaky breath too, the drop in temperature seeming to get to me.

"Are-are you cold?"

"No," I shook my head. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I can give you my jacket."

"Mike, I said I'm fine," I crossed my arms both as a sign of stubbornness and because I was in fact, cold. "Your jacket is a lot thinner than mine so it won't make a difference anyway."

"Fair enough," and he didn't fight it anymore.

Sneaking a quick glance at my watch, I spoke again. "So, what's your curfew? We should probably get you home." With a chuckle and a smile I didn't expect from him, he turned to me.

"You got me out of my house on a Saturday night, had me getting drunk with people older than me that I've never met, and sitting in a 7/11 parking lot at midnight, and you're worried about my curfew?"

I replied with a smile similar to his, because hell, it was infectious.

"Fair enough."

**To make up for my absence, I did add a some extra Mileven fluff at the end there. For more of an explanation on why I've been MIA lately, please see my Twitter. I love you guys. You all really keep me going. I hope you enjoyed this chapter and please review.**

## 10. Chapter 10

**And now, back to reality for our favorite Hawkins high schoolers. I can't believe we're here but please enjoy chapter 10!**

**El's POV**

"So what'd you do this weekend El?"

If I were a paranoid person, I'd say there's a suspicious tone in Kali's question. But since I'm not and it's a totally valid question, I had no trouble answering it.

"Nothing really," I replied with a shrug. "Jim was working all weekend so I pretty much had the house to myself. I got some laundry done... cleaned my room...I went grocery shopping on Saturday." Well, I figured I could be honest about at least one thing.

"Sounds really eventful," Max said sarcastically from besides me.

"It sure was." I gave her a small and knowing smile.

While Kali and Max continued their conversation, I unwrapped the plastic from my PB and J sandwich. It was the first Monday back at school since the party on Saturday and, maybe more importantly, getting to see Mike in a different way. Ever since I dropped him off at his house Saturday night, or I guess technically Sunday morning, I can't help but admit that I've been thinking about how he's been.

There weren't any lights on in his house when I dropped him off so I can't say for sure if someone in his family saw him or if he got in any sort of trouble. Once he got past that, there was the matter of his inevitable hangover.

I don't think I've ever seen someone drink so much their first time. Granted, I can't say for sure that he's never had alcohol before, but seeing how wasted he got, it's a pretty good guess. Since I was responsible for him, I didn't want that to end once he stepped through his front door after I dropped him off.

Not only that, but if he got into any sort of trouble, I didn't want it to

get back to me and then I would be punished too. His sister sure got a good look at me and with giving her my name, it wouldn't take very much to figure out who I am. I really wasn't in the mood to have Hop get on my case for being a bad influence to my peers or whatever he would say.

So apart from him getting home safe, I wanted to help his recovery along as well. If he listened to my instructions though, and if he used the stuff I got him was something that I had yet to find out.

I'll be seeing him at tutoring later today so my curiosity can finally end.

Just as if the universe knew I was thinking about him, he and his friends entered the cafeteria, lunch trays in each of their hands. Even though it was all the way across the room, I could still spot him, because a guy that looks like Mike can't really go unnoticed. Without realizing I was doing it, my eyes followed them and remained there even after they sat down.

"What are you staring at?" Max asked, likely noticing that my gaze and attention was not on our little group.

"No- nothing," I drew my eyes away, knowing I would have to come up with something on the spot. "Someone just spilled something over there and I want to see if someone slips on it."

With a laugh, she quickly turned and glanced around, thankfully not far enough to see Mike and his friends' table.

"That's funny. Let me know if something happens."

"Hey, do you guys know if that project for Berkowitz is due the class before or after Thanksgiving break?" Kali spoke, unsure.

"Before."

"After." Max and I spoke at the same time. Noticing the problem, we, since we're teamed up for the group project Kali's talking about, all groaned.

"Shit," Kali replied, since neither of us were any help. "Hopefully,

someone brings it up in class because I am not letting him know that I have no idea. We don't even have a topic in mind."

"Nothing to fear Kali," Max then turned to me, a small smile on her face. "Maybe El's study buddy can help us."

"He's not really allowed to help with group projects.... Plus he's not in that class so he doesn't really know what's going on." I thought out loud so that I could shoot Max's idea down quickly. There's really no rules in regards to what kind of schoolwork tutors can and cannot help with, at least none that I know of. But the girls don't have to know that.

"You sure he wouldn't be able to help? It doesn't hurt to ask," Kali asked in a way that said she was much more serious about it than Max.

"I mean, I'm sure he'll have ideas but at the end of the day, it's a group project. He's tutoring me, not you guys." As if on cue, the two of the raised their eyebrows. I decided to speak before either of them could get a word in. "Why don't we just get together tomorrow after school and work on it? We can just get it over with."

"Sounds like a plan," Max spoke after a silence I felt was too long. "My place is fine, it that works with you guys."

"Sure," Kali replied with a nod, a much more agreeable reaction than my simple shrug.

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His lips were moving but I couldn't hear anything. I was paying attention, just not in the way one would think.

Instead of listening to him babble on about calculus or the first World War or whatever he was going over at the moment, I watched as he used a finger to adjust his glasses every once in a while. Usually it happened right after his eyes would go wide with excitement from what he was talking about. He was talking with his hands too, which normally I would find annoying, but it was fitting for him since he was talking so passionately.

I decided that he needs a haircut. Nothing big. Just a trim. His curls kept falling into his eyes nearly at the same rate his glasses slipped. I didn't understand why he wasn't pushing his hair back or away from his face at the same time he fixed his glasses. I kept telling myself that although it might not be a good idea, the next time he neglects it, I'll reach out and do it for him. But I never did.

I don't know how much time had passed before he was waving his hand in front of my face, trying to get my attention, even though he already has it.

"You okay?"

His voice broke me from the trance and I lifted my head from my hand to show him that I was alert.

*What are the chances that he knew I was staring at him?*

"Yeah, fine," and I knew I had to come up with a quick excuse. "This is just so incredibly boring." If I said something like that during the first couple of weeks we met, he would have been so hurt by it that he would have immediately shut up and timidly look away.

Based on his smile, I don't think the same can be said now.

"Sorry that I'm not able to entertain you."

"It's okay," I smiled back. "If I found this entertaining at all, I wouldn't be here to begin with." We both laughed at that, since nothing about it was incorrect. Now that we were slightly off topic, or at least not directly talking about school, I asked the question I've had on my mind all day. "Was everything okay at your house after I dropped you off? I didn't, like, get you in trouble or anything right?"

"No, actually. Nancy and Holly were asleep by the time I went into the house and my mom was working overnight so she wasn't even there. I thought I was being kind of loud as I was going up to my room but neither of them woke up so I guess I wasn't." He ended with a shrug.

"And how about the next day? Like in the morning?"

"Oh," his face changed, probably because he was remembering. "Yeah, that was...rough. Good thing it was Sunday because I just played it off as sleeping in because I was up late doing homework and studying. My mom didn't suspect anything, I think. I used pretty much all the stuff you gave me too so thanks again for that. I have some of the Advil left if you want it, since you paid for it and all. Or I could just pay you back if you want."

*Again with the hair.*

"No, that's okay," I answered before the silence got too long. Thankfully I was able to catch his last few words. "Consider it an extension of your birthday gift from me."

"Heh, thanks."

"You're welcome," and then, another question occurred to me, and it was probably the most important one of all. "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah," he nodded, quickly agreeing. "It was different and I don't think I would have ever gone on my own, but yeah. I would," he hesitated, either unsure of what to say or unsure if he should say what he is thinking. "I would do it again. Given the chance."

That's what he said that froze me. What does that mean?

I glanced to the side, like that would give me that answer. I noticed someone standing up, backpack on their shoulder, and saying goodbye to their study partner. A look at the clock confirmed that it was time to leave.

"It's time to go," I told Mike, who likely didn't notice the time either.

"Uh, yeah," he spoke as he looked at the clock too.

Deciding I didn't want to think about what he said any longer, I grabbed my stuff as fast as I could so that I wouldn't have to walk with him out of the building like we usually do. I barely closed my backpack while he just got around to closing his textbook.

"I'll see you Wednesday." I quickly walked away, not giving him a chance to say anything.



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## Mike's POV

I *knew* I shouldn't have said that.

I should have just left it at, "yeah, I had fun." That's what she asked anyway.

She packed her stuff and left too quickly for me to say anything, not that I could think of something anyway. She left in such a rush, you'd think there was a fire.

Noticing that the library was clearing out anyway, I gathered my things, trying to not think about El any longer.

"Well, she couldn't have left any faster."

"Huh, what?" Lucas came up and surprised me.

"Elizabeth," he gestured towards the door of the library. "I don't think I've ever seen someone leave the library so fast."

"Heh, yeah," I laughed. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who noticed El's haste. "She's uh, she's running late to meet with someone." I defended her, even though I didn't know why I felt the need to.

"Or," Lucas started as we both turned to leave, "she just ran out because she was embarrassed."

*What?*

"Embarrassed about what?"

"Dude," he spoke, facing me. "You- you seriously didn't see the way she was looking at you?"

"Wha-when?"

"Like just before she ran out the door. From what I could see, you kind of had to snap her out of it."

"Wha- what do you mean?"

Lucas, never one for being so patient, looked at me like he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I don't know when exactly it started but when looked over at you guys, she was just... staring at you like, like you were the only thing she could focus on. I can't tell what she was thinking obviously but it was something good because whatever it was, she didn't want it to stop. She, I can't believe I'm saying this, but she looked at you like you were the only person in the world."

By now we were halfway to the school's exit, but what Lucas said made me stop in my tracks. It took longer than I would have liked to think of something to say, and when I did, I wasn't sure if it was even the right thing.

"How- how can you tell?"

"You just can. If you were paying attention, you probably would have too. But I guess whatever happened after that is what really set her off. What did you say to her?" He asked it in a suspicious tone, which made sense, since he was most likely correct.

"I uhh, I just," Here's where I had to make a decision.

I hadn't planned to tell any of the guys about my Saturday night with El. I just didn't think it was something that could be easily brought up without it launching into a whole conversation. There's also the fact that, as bad as it might sound, it wasn't really any of their business.

If I could help it, I probably wouldn't end up telling them until several years down the line, when high school, and El Hopper, became a thing of the past.

But something told me that telling Lucas wouldn't be a bad idea. In a couple of ways, he's the one I trust the most. He's not as silly as Dustin and he's able to see things in a more grown up way than Will. It could have something to do with him being the oldest out of all of us but there have been other things over the time we've known each other that Lucas was better at handling.

This would probably be no different.

Of course, I could always make something up and avoid mentioning that I was out on Saturday night with El altogether, but I've never been really good at improvisation.

"So- on Saturday," I started as we pushed through the double doors, leading to the exit. "I was trying to do the physics homework and Nancy comes to my room and tells me there's someone here to see me. At first, I thought it was you guys so I didn't think anything of it. But, uhh, it was her." With my thumb, I pointed back to the building, letting him know I was talking about El without having to say her name. I wasn't entire sure how I should address her around him.

"Okay...." Lucas trailed off and allowed me to continue.

"She was on her way to this... party. And she stopped by to see if I wanted to... go with her."

"Wait, what? You were out together? Like, *out out*?"

"Not like that...." *Or is that how he meant it?* "Or maybe like that. I don't know," I spoke quickly. "But," and here came the hardest part of the whole story, "there were drinks and stuff and I had more than I probably should have." With wide eyes and all, his facial expression looked just how I pictured. "Anyway, long story short: before she ran out she asked if I had fun. I said I did and," I knew I had to be honest. Simply saying yes wouldn't have made her leave the way she did. "And I said that if I had the chance, I'd do it again."

"Damn," Lucas spoke after a moment, like he was thinking it over.

"What?!" I asked, far more alert to his reaction than before. "What is it?"

"You pretty much implied you want to go out with her again."

"Wha- no! That's not what I said."

"That's probably what she thinks you meant," Lucas clarified. "Why else would she run away like that?"

"N-no." We reached his car and I walked to the passenger side. "I don't think.... No, I mean, I. No." I reached to fix my glasses again.

"Based on that reaction, she doesn't seem the type to take comments like that lightly. You should be more careful with what you say around a girl like Elizabeth Hopper."

"El."

"What?"

"She likes to be called 'El'," I decided to tell him. Noticing the look he gave me, I knew I had to elaborate. "It's not just me. She wants everyone to call her that."

"Sure Mike," I heard his tone change slightly from how it had been before, as he unlocked and opened his car door. "Whatever you say."

**Next is a chapter that I haven't been working on, but yet am very much looking forward to. Don't forget that you can follow me on Twitter for behind the scenes facts about the chapter and sneak peeks for later ones. I am at D13Tribute. Please review!**

## 11. Chapter 11

**So for those of you who follow me on Twitter, you may already know how excited I am about this chapter. I hope by the end of it, you'll see why. Here's chapter 11 (lol) of Danger Zone!**

### El's POV

I woke up to the smell of, if it makes any sense, burnt apples. It wasn't a candle or anything. The smell, and very faint trace of smoke in the air confirmed that it was coming from the kitchen. More specifically, the stove. Seeing as it was the first full day of my holiday weekend, and I didn't want it to start off with my house burning down. I dragged myself out of bed and headed towards the kitchen.

Once there, the smoke and smell were a lot worse, but it was at least explained by seeing Jim in the middle of it all, looking so out of place.

"What's going on?" I spoke, alerting him that I was in the room.

"Good morning," Jim gruffed while holding what appeared to be the remainder of burnt apple pie in a metal tin. "I'm just uh, working on somethin'."

"Yeah, I can see," I spoke as I walked to the window and pulled it open, hoping it would clear the air out before the smoke alarm rang. "Why are you baking a pie?"

"It's Thanksgiving," he answered as if I didn't already know.

"I know," I leaned on the counter and crossed my arms. "But we always like, buy everything." I explained our usual tradition for the past few years since he seems to have forgotten.

"Right," he put the pan down on top to the stove. "I was going to tell you last night, but you were knocked out on the couch when I got home." I blinked, wondering where he was going with this. "We've been invited to Thanksgiving dinner."

"What? Where?" I stood up straight.

"You uh-", he hesitated. "You remember Joyce."

"Joyce?! Your..." I sputtered, "friend?" He let out a single chuckle.

"Yes, her."

"Well, did-did you tell her we can't go?"

"Why wouldn't we be able to go?" He asked in an uncharacteristically patient way.

"Because we already have plans!"

"El," he started, leaning against the counter next to the stove himself, "sitting on the couch, watching the parade, and then eating whatever frozen dinner we can find and store brought desert are not plans."

"Sure they are," I argued. "We do it every year."

"Very funny kid. Go wash up and come get some breakfast."

"No," I said it firmly, so I knew he could hear me.

"No?" he asked as if he pretended not to hear me.

"I don't want to go."

"Excuse me?"

Knowing I couldn't tell him the real reason, that I simply don't know this woman or her family well enough to have Thanksgiving dinner with them, nor do I care enough to try, I went with what was most logical and fair.

"You-you can't just spring plans on me at the last minute and expect me to be okay with it. I don't have to go if I don't want to. I'll just," I paused, knowing I couldn't say or imply that I was going to go out with my friends since they obviously wouldn't be available today, "stay here."

After much too long a silence, he placed his hands on the island in front of him and looked at me.

"I don't think I made myself clear." Ugh, I hate when he uses his Chief Hopper tone on me. "I didn't tell you about going to Joyce's so you can confirm it with me or not. You're going. Like it or not."

"But dad, I don't-."

"Now either you march your butt over to Joyce's house with me later or I'm going to take your car keys and you won't be able to drive until after you graduate."

Interesting that that's the life event he selected.

"If you take away my car, how am I going to get to school?" I asked, knowing I got him there.

"I'll drive you myself. Every morning," he spoke like he had that answer ready.

Damn it.

With a huff, looking and sounding like the very child I knew he thought I was being, I crossed my arms.

"Fine."

A grin, that he made no effort to hide, grew on his face. "Go get ready. We're leaving at one." Waiting until he turned back around, I rolled my eyes and stormed off into the bathroom.

This is SO stupid. Now that I have a few days off school and am I able to keep my mind off it, I didn't plan to have to worry about something like this.

There's no way in hell I ever thought we'd be going somewhere, let alone *Joyce's* house for Thanksgiving. It's surprising for a few reasons, but probably most importantly is that I hadn't even realized she was still around. Or at least enough for her to think it's okay to invite us to something like Thanksgiving dinner.

This means that whatever is going on with Joyce and Hop is more serious than I thought. To have Thanksgiving dinner with someone is a big deal. And while it is a day to be with family and friends, there's

more than just friendship there.

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At one p.m. on the dot, Hopper blared the horn from his blazer and I knew I couldn't put off leaving any longer. Grabbing my leather jacket from the back of the couch, I took the few steps needed to get out of the house, lock the door behind me, and walked, not very excitedly, to the car.

With Hawkins not being a very large town, it took less than fifteen minutes until we arrived to our host's house. Despite him being the Chief of police, I don't know how I felt that he parked in her driveway with no hesitation.

"Now look," he spoke, just after turning the car off. "I know how you may... feel about all this." *All about what?* "But please," he continued, "behave. Joyce didn't have to invite us but she did, so you know, keep that in mind."

"Sure," I shrugged, just wanting to get this entire day over with. "Whatever." I opened the door and stepped out, crossing my arms as I walked towards the house. With Jim a few steps behind, I reached the front door first but waited until he caught up to me since I didn't want to be the one to ring the doorbell. As he stepped next to me, he cleared his throat and reached his hand out along the door frame to signal to whoever was inside at the moment that we had arrived.

It only took less than a minute before the door opened and Joyce, looking as average as ever, smiled at seeing us.

"Oh, hi! I'm so glad you could make it," there was something in her voice, along with the words she chose to say, that made me think she wasn't sure if we were going to show up.

"Hi, Joyce. Thank you for having us," Through my peripheral vision, I saw the dopey smile Jim gave her. I also, despite the car ride over with him, just now noticed the way he was dressed.

I can't remember the last time I've seen him in a dress shirt and a quick look at the rest of him confirmed that his pants were freshly cleaned and, of all things, ironed. His hair was slicked and pulled



back, a huge difference to his normal unruliness. And despite that he didn't shave completely, he definitely did something to shape his beard up.

I don't know how I didn't notice this before, but he was holding flowers in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

After a few seconds of silence, which probably wasn't as long as it felt, Jim nudged me, and it pulled me out of my thoughts. Knowing he wanted me to say something, I turned back to Joyce.

"Yeah, uh, thanks Joyce," I spoke as I uncrossed my arms. "It's nice of you to invite us."

"Of course. Anytime," she smiled again. "Please, come on in."

Walking into Joyce's house, I could tell it was, simply put, one of the most comfortable places I've ever seen. The front door opened up to the living room, which seemed warmer than it was due to the dim lighting and the cozy-looking blankets that were placed on the back of the couches.

It was obvious that the room and by extension, house were tidied up before Hop and I arrived. But it wasn't spotless. There was a mug on the coffee table that looked like it was forgotten there. The cushions on the couches were crooked and the one that had a design was flipped upside down. There were three family photos of Joyce, Will, and Johnathan scattered around the room and probably more throughout the house.

It looked... lived in. Inviting and welcoming.

All that along with the scent of the turkey coming from the oven, roasted potatoes, and what I believe to be cinnamon sugar cookies that filled the air made me feel something unexpected.

It reminded me a lot of my childhood. This looked and, dare I say, felt like a home.

"You have a beautiful home." I found myself saying out loud before I could stop it.

"Thank you El," Joyce sounded as surprised as I was to say it. "Do-um, can I get you anything to drink?"

"No, not right now. Thanks," I answered casually as I turned to face the two of them.

"Okay. So, umm, dinner will be ready soon. The boys are around here somewhere-. Ah, Johnathan."

As she said it, I saw a new person enter the room, and I knew I would finally be putting a face to the name.

Joyce's older son was taller than her but not as tall as Jim, which was clearly noticed when they shook hands and Johnathan tried to make his handshake stronger. He looked more like Will than he did to his mom, but he too tried to dress up for the occasion.

The most significant part about him that I noticed though was that he, as much as he tried to hide it, didn't look as pleased to have Hopper or I here as one would think.

Hmm.

Before I could say or do anything, Will appeared from the hallway that I assumed lead to the rest of the house. I can't say for sure if Will looked extra nervous on his own or everyone else's anxiety just transferred onto him.

"Johnathan, um, this is my daughter El. Will, I think you two already know each other," Hop spoke as he reached out to me so I could be properly introduced.

"Hi," I directly at Johnathan as I approached the three of them, and just then noticed that Joyce was no longer in the room. "Nice to meet you," I spoke with a small smile, trying to express that I could relate to how he was feeling about having us over. "Hey, Will."

"Hi," he spoke, as timid as ever. "Uh, thanks for coming."

"Yeah," I shrugged, "sure."

"I'm going to go see if Joyce needs helps in the kitchen," Jim excused

himself then, leaving me with Joyce's sons in their living room.

A few uncomfortable seconds passed before Johnathan spoke.

"So... it's El?"

"Elizabeth, but that's too much" I explained. "The only people that call me that are my teachers, really." At that, Will made a face like he was about to speak and if he's staying on topic, my best guess is that he would say something about me being tutored by Mike. Deciding not to let it come up, I spoke instead. "Umm, is there anywhere here that I could smoke? I haven't had one all day."

"Oh, uh," Johnathan stuttered, clearly surprised by my question.

"You can go out to the back porch. She doesn't think we know about it, but it's where our mom goes," Will spoke. I smirked, really intrigued by this new knowledge about Joyce.

Maybe she isn't as bad as I thought.

"Okay, thanks. Where is it?"

"It's just past the kitchen," Will explained, nodding his head in that direction. I nodded as I walked past him, realizing I would interrupt Hopper and Joyce when I entered the kitchen.

Before I reached it though, Joyce turned the corner holding a bowl of what looked like gravy and we nearly bumped into each other.

"Oh, sorry El," she apologized and stopped herself in her tracks. "Did you need something?"

"I was just going to go out for a smoke," I explained, making sure not to sound like I was asking her permission or if I cared about her reaction.

"Dinner's actually ready. If you could take a seat, that'd be great. Anywhere is fine." Holding the bowl in one hand, she gestured to the dining room table to the side of us, where all the places were set. Facing her again, Jim now stood by her, holding two more side plates.

"Umm," Jim, who must have heard my interaction with Joyce about where I was going, gave me a look. "Sure, yeah." Walking a couple of steps, I pulled out the chair and sat at the spot closest to where I was just standing. With Will and Johnathan doing the same, it was easier to see how many seats were set and that once Hopper and Joyce sat down, there was still an empty one left.

"Is someone else coming?" I asked Joyce, who was now placing the wine Jim had brought onto the table.

"Yes," just as she was about to continue, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Johnathan announced, looking more enthusiastic than I had seen him. It took about another minute for Johnathan to return and with him was who I assumed to be our last dinner guest.

I nearly choked on my lemonade at seeing Nancy, smiling and taking quick steps to hug Joyce. After assuring her that she was doing well, she pulled away and like magnets, or probably because I couldn't stop staring at her, our eyes met.

"Hi," she directed at me in a way I knew meant she recognized me.

What a small damn world.

**And that concludes part one! Sorry to do this but I did give myself a deadline and this is the best loophole I could come up with to meet it! But this does give me more time to work on the more dramatic part of the chapter. I hope you enjoyed and please review. If you happen to be reading this prior to watching season 3, happy viewing!**